ADVENTURES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



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Cerritos College



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About the Authors



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About the Book

Published January 2026

Adventures in Intercultural Communication offers an engaging, narrative-rich introduction to the core concepts outlined in the CID 150 Intercultural Communication descriptor for the California Community College System. The text positions intercultural communication as a dynamic, transactional process—one that influences how we interpret the world, build relationships, and participate in an increasingly interconnected global community. As an open educational resource (OER), the book blends curated existing materials with substantial original content. New features include Spotlight on Social Media, Student Voices, Cultural Connection stories, and Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills, inviting students to connect theory with lived experience.

The early chapters establish the foundations of the field, emphasizing that communication is shaped by cultural histories, social norms, and shared expectations. A central thread throughout the text is Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). Students are guided through developmental models, including the Staircase Model, to understand how competence evolves—from initial unawareness to intuitive, adaptive communication across cultural differences. These chapters also explore how cultural filters and digital divides influence perception in contemporary communication environments.

As the book progresses, students examine cultural identity, values, and the emotional terrain of navigating unfamiliar cultural spaces. Frameworks such as Identity Development, Dimensions of Cultural Variability, the Dialectical Approach, and the W-Curve Model of Culture Shock help learners make sense of how identities are formed, negotiated, and sometimes challenged. These concepts are paired with examples and reflections that resonate with the experiences of community college students.

The “messaging” chapters highlight how meaning is constructed through both verbal and nonverbal channels. Students consider how language shapes thought through Linguistic Relativity and explore why cultures differ in their use of silence, directness, and contextual cues. Nonverbal communication—responsible for much of our emotional meaning—is unpacked through real-world illustrations of posture, eye contact, and personal space.

The final chapters underscore the relational nature of intercultural communication, addressing barriers such as prejudice, ethnocentrism, and systemic inequities. Students learn tools for navigating conflict, including Face-Negotiation Theory, and explore the possibilities that emerge when people build relationships across cultural boundaries. The text ultimately affirms that intercultural engagement fosters empathy, growth, and deeper human connection.

Designed with first- and second-year college students in mind, the book incorporates accessible explanations, reflective activities, and inclusive examples. Its CC-BY-NC-SA license and placement on the LibreTexts platform make it adaptable for face-to-face, hybrid, and online learning. The text reflects a commitment to equity, universal design, and student-centered learning—making it a flexible, comprehensive resource for courses aligned with CID 150.

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1: WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION?

Learning Objectives

- Define intercultural communication and explain its significance in diverse contexts
- Describe culture as a dynamic, multifaceted system of shared meanings
- Illustrate the transactional model of communication and its relevance to intercultural exchange
- Summarize key historical developments in the field of intercultural communication
- Understand the importance of intercultural competence and why it matters in today's diverse world



- Topic hierarchy

1.1: Starting Your Journey with Intercultural Communication

1.2: Why study intercultural communication?

1.3: Definition of Culture

1.4: Communication Explained via the Transactional Model

1.5: A Very Brief History of Intercultural Communication

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1.1: Starting Your Journey with Intercultural Communication

Introduction and Welcome

Kim and Angela took on this project as a labor of love. We were fortunate to study with extraordinary faculty during our graduate work at CSU Fullerton, including Stella Ting-Toomey, Bill Gudykunst, Irene Matz, Ruth Guzley, Rich Wiseman, and Jeanine Congalton. These professors instilled in us a deep appreciation for the power of communication in our everyday lives — with family, friends, colleagues, classmates, and even strangers.

Working closely with Stella Ting-Toomey and Bill Gudykunst remains one of the great highlights of our educational journey. Stella, in particular, shaped our lives as a professor, mentor, thesis adviser, and life-long friend.

In a world that is more interconnected than ever — yet where communication and public discourse are too often used to criticize, divide, or instill fear — we approached this book in the spirit our professors and families instilled in us: that our similarities can unite us, and our differences can strengthen us.

Our hope is that as you read this book, you will learn something meaningful about yourself, your family, your community, and people from around the world. And we hope that your exploration of intercultural communication becomes a pathway for building bridges, deepening understanding, and fostering relationships across cultures.

Please take a moment to read our first cultural connection, from our professor Dr. Irene Matz.

Cultural Connection - Ghana, West Africa: 1987

My son was a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana, West Africa in 1987. He had been gone for almost two years in a country where there were little phone services and mail took months for delivery. As a mother, those months and years seemed like an eternity, and I yearned just to hear his voice.

His brothers and I planned a Christmas vacation there during one of California's coldest periods in history. We welcomed the time in a warm country where we could once again share a holiday together. Traveling to a "Third World" country was an unusual experience; military personnel with guns were conspicuously stationed throughout the country and border checkpoints were sporadically located through the land. Men and women were separated during these searches and being the only woman in our group of four, I became uncomfortable, often, needlessly frightened. My son knew their regulations and would quickly rescue me from these searches.

Intercultural communication with another culture is challenging; their symbols, emblems, and proxemics send different messages. One particular experience has been emblazoned in my mind and unforgettable. Our small group was walking through a village when I saw a group of young folks and waved to them. They quickly raced towards us and my son looked at me and said, "what have you done now." The wave as I saw as a friendly hello gesture, meant come to me. We laughed at another miscommunication. At the end of our two week visit, I'm certain; although my son never said anything, was relieved as he protected and guided us through this amazing country.

My son had made friends with a family, and they invited us to share Christmas day with them. It is unusual for a Muslim family in Ghana to celebrate a Christmas holiday, yet this was another way the Ghanian people express their friendliness, hospitality, and inclusiveness. We brought a suitcase filled with gifts for the family and now reflecting back, I realize their graciousness in accepting these strange gifts. One particular gift was homemade Christmas cookies, and they had never experienced eating sugar. I hoped that night that they were not ill. The gift giving was an exchange of friendship and affections and an increased appreciation of two cultures. At a time now, decades later in our history when barriers continue to divide people and countries, two families and cultures were joined together in the spirit of friendship and love. This was an unforgettable Christmas – one of our best Christmases ever.

S. Irene Matz, PhD
Assoicate Professor
College of Communication, Cal State Fullerton

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have you ever experienced or witnessed a moment where a gesture, word, or behavior was misunderstood across cultures? What happened, and what did you learn from it?

2. What does this moment teach us about intercultural hospitality and the power of shared traditions? How might this challenge assumptions we hold about cultural or religious boundaries?

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1.2: Why study intercultural communication?

Cultural Connections: The Sushi Misunderstanding

"When I arrived in Tokyo for my semester abroad, I was excited to immerse myself in Japanese culture. On my first night, my host family took me to a local sushi restaurant. Wanting to show appreciation, I picked up a piece of sushi, dipped it generously in soy sauce, and took a big taste - rice first.

My host mother smiled politely, but I noticed a bit of discomfort. After dinner, my host sister came into my room to chat. She gently explained to me that in Japan, it's customary to dip the fish side of the sushi into soy sauce, not the rice, to preserve the flavor and to avoid making a mess. I was mortified! I didn't mean to be disrespectful, but I had no idea..."

Jordan's story is a reminder that even the smallest gestures - like how we dip our sushi - can carry deep cultural meaning. What felt like a simple dinner to her was, in fact, an intercultural exchange shaped by values, expectations, and unspoken rules. These moments happen all the time, often without us realizing it. And when we do notice them, they can leave us feeling, surprised, confused, or even inspired.

In this chapter, we explore why studying intercultural communication matters - not just for travelers and diplomats, but for all of us living in this diverse and interconnected world.

What is intercultural communication?

"Intercultural communication is a symbolic exchange process between persons of different cultures in their attempt to create shared meanings in a given context" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2022, p.30). Simply put, **intercultural communication** happens when people from different cultures interact, share ideas, and try to understand each other. This process of making meaning together involves using words, gestures, and other forms of expression. It's like having a conversation where both sides bring their own beliefs, values, and experiences, and they work together to find common ground. This exchange is shaped by the larger society around them, including things like history, power dynamics, and social norms.

The United States isn't the only country experiencing cultural change. The speedy advances of today's technology - like faster travel, social media, and instant messaging - has encouraged people from all over the world to connect. Business and trade across countries also add to this mixing of cultures. At the same time, wars, poverty, and political issues are forcing many people to move to new countries as refugees or for economic survival. While this can make communities more diverse, it can also lead to tension - sometimes because people worry about job competition, changes to local traditions, or simply out of fear of what they don't understand.

The Need for Intercultural Communication Today

Globalization - the growing connection between countries - has powerful effects on people's lives, both positive and negative. People in wealthier countries may benefit from global travel, job opportunities, and safer communities, while in other parts of the world many still face hunger, lack of clean water, poor housing, unemployment, and violence. These problems, often made worse by corruption and limited access to education and healthcare, cause many people to migrate, thus creating social and political instability. Even within wealthier countries, sharp divides in income, social class, and geography have fueled the rising of nationalism and populism. At the same time, advances in technology and communication mean that exposure to different cultures is no longer limited to travel or immigration - it happens daily through social media, global businesses, and online interactions. This reality makes intercultural understanding and sensitivity not only personally enriching, but socially and professionally essential in today's world. The following points highlight some of the most important reasons why developing intercultural sensitivity is both relevant and necessary in our modern world:



Figure 1.1.1: UK International Development Secretary, Justine Greening, talking with Syrian children in the Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan

- Technology and Media - Digital tools and social media platforms bring cultures together like never before:
  - Online access exposes people to diverse perspectives, lifestyles, and global news.
  - Social media influences identity and values, connecting individuals across the globe.
  - Media literacy helps decode cultural bias and understand global events in context.
- Travel and Global Exchange - Modern mobility fuels cultural learning and awareness:
  - Work, education, and leisure travel offer firsthand experiences with other cultures.
  - Living or studying abroad influences how we view our own culture and builds empathy.
- Personal Growth and Identity - Engaging with diverse cultures leads to deeper self-awareness and builds emotional intelligence:
  - Intercultural competence enriches relationships, communication, and empathy.
  - Learning about other cultures helps us better understand our own beliefs and values.
- Professional and Leadership Influence - Cultural fluency is a key asset in today's interconnected world:
  - Global workplaces require adaptability and collaboration across cultures.
  - Influential leaders, like Pope Leo, Greta Thunberg, and Malala, model inclusivity and responsible global citizenship.
  - Most global leaders acknowledge that intercultural competence is one of the top 5 leadership skills necessary for success.
- Social Harmony and Responsibility - Intercultural awareness promotes peace, reduces prejudice, and combats misinformation.
  - Cultural education counters stereotypes and ethnocentricism.
  - Everyday interactions help build bridges across divides, contributing to a more just and inclusive society.

Key Statistics Related to Intercultural Communication

In efforts to explain the world's population to young children, David J. Smith asks children to imagine the world as a small village so they can understand the vast population figures in a more comprehensible way. In 2025, the world's population is estimated to be around 8.23 billion people. Instead of talking about numbers of this magnitude, he represents the world as 100 people, where one imaginary person represents 82,300,000 people from the real world. Using Smith's model, we can more easily examine what nationalities make up the world's population, what languages they speak, how old they are, and how these statistics involve wealth and education.

Here are some interesting facts from Smith's global village (8). Of the 100 people living in the village:

- 56 are from Asia
- 17 are from Africa
- 10 are from Europe
- 8 are from Latin America and the Caribbean
- 5 are from the United States and Canada
- 1 is from Oceania

Additionally, our global village is made up of a variety of religions teaching different belief systems, each offering unique outlooks on life, purpose, morality, and community. These diverse faiths shape our values, traditions, and daily practices highlighting the richness of cultural expression and the importance of mutual respect and understanding among people of different spiritual

backgrounds. Based on the Pew Research Center's report on global religious demographics from June 2025 and covering trends up to 2020, here's what our village of 100 would include:

- 29 Christians (including Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, and other denominations)
- 26 Muslims (split between Sunni and Shia)
- 24 non-religious (including atheists and agnostics)
- 15 Hindus
- 7 Buddhists
- 1 Jewish
- 2 Others (such as Sikhism, Jainism, Baha'i, Shinto, Taoism, etc.)

So, how do these 100 people talk with one another? While there are nearly 7,000 languages spoken in this village, more than 50% of the villagers speak one of these eight (10):

- 26 speak a Chinese dialect (16 speak Mandarin)
- 10 speak English
- 8 speak Hindi
- 7 speak Spanish
- 4 speak Arabic
- 3 speak Bengali
- 3 speak Portuguese
- 2 speak Russian
- 37 speak one of thousands of other languages

Although there are 36 school-aged villagers (5-24 years), only 31 of them go to school, and there is only one teacher. Of the people old enough to read, 14 cannot read at all. Sadly, most of those who cannot read are females as males still get preferential treatment. Additionally, according to the WHO (World Health Organization), only 1 out of the 100 villagers breaths clean air while the other 99 breath polluted air. If the village's total income were equally divided, each person would earn about $28,380 annually. Instead, the richest 10 people in the village earn more than $122,100 a year, the poorest 10 villagers survive on less than $2.50 a day, while the remaining 80 earn somewhere in between. With the average cost for food and shelter being at about $5,000 a year, many of the poorest people in our village are hard-pressed to meet their basic needs.

Moreover, it probably does not surprise you that the people with less money are also likely not to have electricity and education. Besides simple cultural differences such as what language one speaks or the foods they prefer; cultural identity impacts individuals' accessibility to certain resources such as shelter, electricity, running water, health care, education, and political and legal systems. If we return to the United States from our look at the global village we see that according to Moore (62-63, 149-50):

- About 22 percent of young black men ages 16-24 are neither in school nor working. Compare this to 10 percent of young white men. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024)
- Black women are 3-4 times more likely than white women to die in childbirth. (CDC, 2023)
- Black levels of unemployment have been roughly twice those of white Americans, consistent with trends seen since the mid-20th century (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024)
- Women hold only 28% seats in the U.S.Congress as of 2025. While this is progress, women are still significantly underrepresented (Center for American Women and Politics, 2025).
- Similarly, among the Fortune 500 companies, only 9 percent have female CEOs, and women hold approximately 30% of executive and senior-level positions (Catalyst, 2024).
- Women's earnings average 82 cents for every $1 earned by men—resulting in a lifetime loss of over $600,000 (National
- Women's Law Center, 2024). To make the same annual salary as her male counterpart, a woman would have to work 2.5 more months each year (National Women's Law Center, 2024).

Think about culture and communication as a reciprocal process: culture affects communication and communication affects culture. Both work together to shape how we identify as belonging to one culture or another, how we feel about belonging to a particular cultural group, how we communicate with other cultural groups, and how that group is regarded in the larger social system. In other words, what is the value and level of power afforded to various cultural groups? As you will see, this is often a reflection of the language used to refer to a particular group of people, or the relative value placed on their communication practices.

Ethics and intercultural communication

When we reference the widespread use of social media, we need to keep in mind the very real nature of the **digital divide** between those (predominately in developed countries) with easy access to *Facebook* and other online services and those (predominately in developing countries) who have no Internet connectivity, and possibly even no access to electricity. In fact, for many of our co-denizens of the 21st-century, daily routines do not involve reading *tweets*, posting *Facebook* updates, or checking *Instagram*, but rather seeking to fill basic human needs — food, water, shelter. Extreme poverty remains a critical issue. According to the World Bank Groups' Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024, there are still nearly 700 million people (about 8.5% of the world's population) who survive on less than $2.15 a day while 3.5 billion people (about 44% of the global population) lived below $6.85 a day. The forces of globalization, discussed at the beginning of this chapter, have indeed brought the world closer together in terms of communication and commerce, but large numbers of our global population remain marginalized. That includes not only individuals from countries in Africa, Latin America or Southeast Asia, but also factory workers and others holding blue-collar jobs who have lost their livelihoods to outsourcing or to companies moving factories to lower wage economies. These disparities have fueled social movements targeting inequality - from the "Occupy" protests of 2011-2012, protesting against the elite 1% of the population, or the election of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016 and 2024, who was elected in large part due to votes from those who feel left out of the 21st century US economy.

Spotlight on Social Media: The Digital Divide

Even though we live in a highly connected world, according to a **2025 UN report, more than 2.5 billion people - about one-third of the world's population - still do not have access to the internet.** That's a huge number of people who are missing out on information, resources, and opportunities many of us take for granted every day. While internet use is commonplace in wealthier countries (with more than 9 out of 10 people online), in some parts of Africa and other low-income regions, fewer than 3 in 10 people are connected. This report warns that without urgent action, AI's benefits may remain concentrated among a privileged few, exacerbating existing inequalities.

The digital divide isn't just about having a computer or smartphone anymore. It's also about who can afford fast internet, who has the skills to use it, and who gets left behind as new technologies - like AI - become part of our daily life. Even in the U.S., rural communities continue to struggle with broadband access. While efforts have been made to expand infrastructure, millions of Americans remain disconnected, making it hard to apply for jobs, pay bills, take online classes, or even schedule a doctor's appointment. Unfortunately, according to the **UNESCO (2024)** report on AI literacy, women, disabled individuals, and people in rural areas are often disproportionately affected by digital exclusion, further reinforcing economic and social disparities.

The good news is, there are global efforts underway to close this gap. Organizations like the **World Economic Forum's Edison Alliance** have helped over a billion people gain access to digital tools and services. Countries like Finland have even made internet access a legal right for all citizens, recognizing how essential it is in the modern world.

Still, the digital divide is more than a tech problem - it's a **social justice** issue. When people don't have digital access, it's not only harder to get online, it becomes harder to fully participate in society. Bridging this gap means creating a more inclusive, informed, and connected global community.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the digital divide reinforce cultural identity differences and social exclusion, particularly for nondominant groups?
2. Should governments declare broadband internet access a legal right, like they have in Finland? Why or why not?
3. What roles do digital literacy and AI access play in deepening or closing the digital divide?



Figure 1.1.2: Occupy general strike in 2011, Oakland, California

To be truly interculturally competent means more than showing responsibility and empathy in our personal encounters - it also requires extending that same mindset to the broader world. Being an engaged global citizen means caring about people and events beyond our own backyards and recognizing the privileged positions many of us hold. Part of this process is stepping outside our daily routines of communication and information-gathering and breaking free from our social media bubbles to hear different voices and perspectives. Doing this helps us better understand the complexities of global communities and deepens our awareness of the ongoing struggles for social justice, where confronting discrimination and addressing inequalities are essential. As both consumers and producers of culture, we play an active role in shaping the world around us. That's why it's important not to think of culture as fixed or unchanging: cultures evolve over time, shaped by countless human choices and forces.

Of course, change isn't always easy. It's human nature to gravitate toward people who are like us - who look like us, think like us, share our values, and maybe even root for the same sports teams. This tendency is known as **homophily**, and while it's completely normal, it can also create barriers. If we're not careful, this instinct to "stick with our own" can cause us to see others - especially those who look different, talk different, or come from unfamiliar cultures - as outsiders or even threats. This process is called **"othering."** History provides tragic reminders where unchecked othering can lead: the Holocaust in Germany, the genocide in Rwanda, and more recent ethnic violence in Myanmar and Sudan.



Figure 1.1.3: Refugees from Syria on their way to Europe

But othering isn't just something that happens "out there" in the world. It's happening right here and right now in the United States. Think about the rhetoric surrounding the southern U.S. border or the controversy over how we teach U.S. history in schools. Whether it's debates about immigration policy, book bans, or protests over diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, these moments reflect a deeper struggle: **some people feel threatened by change** - by unfamiliar cultures, shifting demographics, or simply by voices that haven't always been so vocal in the past. Since 2015, waves of refugees and migrants from war-torn countries have led to fierce political debates - not just in Europe, but also here at home in the United States. This has fueled the rise of **nationalistic rhetoric**, much like what we saw during the rise of "America First" politics. What starts as patriotism can easily slide into **xenophobia**, especially when leaders use fear to rally support. We've seen examples of this in anti-Asian hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic, or in the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric during the recent U.S. election seasons.

Political leaders play a huge role in shaping how we treat each other. When they promote empathy and inclusion, people follow. When they use fear and blame, the results can be division and hostility. That's why **intercultural understanding isn't just an optional skill anymore - it's a necessity.** The more we learn about each other, the less room there is for fear, and the more prepared we are to live and lead in an increasingly diverse and connected world.

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1.3: Definition of Culture

Culture: Central to our lives

Embedded in the term intercultural communication is the word **culture**. Culture is a slippery concept with many meanings. Back in the 1950's, Kluckhohn and Kroeber (1952) identified over 150 definitions of culture. Decades later, Baldwin, Faulkner, and Hecht (2006) compiled and analyzed over 300 definitions, highlighting how the term has become a "moving target" shaped by different disciplinary perspectives. One meaning of culture - *high culture*- or **Culture** with a capital C - refers to literature, the arts, and an educated lifestyle. This is not our focus here. Unsteady, for intercultural communication, culture refers to everyday patterns of life. Neuliep (2012) defines culture as **"an accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors, shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and verbal and nonverbal symbol systems**" (p. 19). We will use this as our working definition, refining it subsequently to embrace other concepts beyond that of national cultures. From this traditional description of culture, several ideas emerge as being of importance:

An accumulated pattern of values, beliefs, and behaviors...

Individual cultural identities develop over time, with handed-down concepts and actions being reinforced through repetition in a gradual socialization process. Culture references a number of aspects of normal human existence, from weighty issues such as our worldview and ethical–moral standards to more mundane matters such as how we greet each other or the kinds of food we like to eat.

...shared by an identifiable group of people...

These cultural norms represent fundamental, default values for individuals identified with that cultural group. That group may be small or large, fixed in a single location or dispersed among different **diaspora** communities (geographically separated). However, no matter where they may be, they share particular characteristics that make them a distinct group.

...with a common history...

How important historical memory is to members of a culture may vary. In some cases, as with Native Americans, or for other groups having been displaced or suffered acute social injustice, their history is likely to be well known and to play a significant role in determining cultural values as well as in shaping interactions with other groups. According to Rogers and Steinfatt (1999), "collective cultural consciousness," the embedded memories of historical events important to a particular cultural group, can act as a kind of "message filter", significantly affecting communication dynamics (p. 3).

...and (common) verbal and nonverbal symbol systems.

Language plays an oversized role in social cohesion and is the most important vehicle for transmission of cultural values. Nonverbal communication patterns are also a prominent constituent part of a group's identity and an easily identifiable marker for group membership. Both systems are based on symbols. Some see the use of symbols as the essence of a culture. For anthropologist Clifford Geertz, culture is a complex set of symbols used to create order and sense in our lives. According to Geertz, cultures "denote an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89). While symbols may sometimes seem arbitrary (i.e., no inherent connection to their meaning), they nevertheless can be powerful, embodying deeply held values and beliefs.



Figure 1.2.1: Balinese dancers in vibrant, gilded costumes prepare for a traditional dance with ornate fans.

Culture is not something we are born with, but rather it is learned, starting with our families, then moving on to our school experiences, and friends, and media. We often are not aware of the cultural values we embrace, even though many of those values and behaviors determine important aspects of our lives. They may only come to the surface when we encounter people who come from different cultures. In that sense, culture is often described as hidden (Hall, 1966). Culture is not fixed and immutable; culture does not exist in a vacuum, but is influenced by historical, social, political, and economic conditions. Cultural values are constructed from social dynamics in the countries or groups represented. Those values are not necessarily universally embraced.

In everyday life, cultures are often associated with nation-states, as assumed in Neuliep's definition. This can be traced back to the work of early 19th-century German scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was one of the first to equate nations with cultures (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). We often hear about French culture or Chinese culture. But within political boundaries, cultures are rarely monolithic. There tend to be many regional differences, as well as differences based on ethnicity, age, profession, social class, and other categories. National cultures change, whether it's a consequence of catastrophic events such as wars or natural disasters, or simply through contact with a foreign culture. One could point to the spread of U.S. culture, for example, through the popularity of American movies and music, as well as through military interventions. In recent years we're seeing South Korean popular culture develop a large following outside of Korea. K-pop, as it's called, has many fans worldwide, some of whom adapt aspects of the K-pop sub-culture such as dress, hair style, or mannerisms (Kim, 2013). The fact is that as individuals we don't necessarily fit the mold of the national culture in which we were raised. Some scholars speak of culture as something often contested (see Jackson, 2010; Pillar, 2017). Hippies in the 1960s, for example, saw themselves in opposition to the cultural mainstream of many Western countries, in political views, in dress, and in attitudes towards work and leisure. In the end, culture is personal and fluid.



Figure 1.2.2: Korean K-Pop group Girls' Generation, popular world wide

With these perspectives on culture, we can return to our initial working definition and add some qualifiers. This traditional view of culture implies a static state, not the flexibility described above. It also includes a common history, but a dynamic vision of culture embraces the idea that cultures can be built on the fly, through individuals coming together due to commonalities of one kind or another, possibly even for a short duration of time. Finally, sharing values, behaviors and languages may be true only in a restricted sense. It is useful to have knowledge of the traditional conception of culture, but at the same time understand new and different perspectives on what "culture" is.

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1.4: Communication Explained via the Transactional Model

Most of us admit that communication is important, but it's often in the back of our minds or viewed as something that "just happens." Putting communication at the front of your mind and becoming more aware of how you communicate can be informative and have many positive effects. In this section, as we learn the principles of communication, I encourage you to take note of aspects of communication that you haven't thought about before and begin to apply the principles of communication to various parts of your life.

Communication Meets Needs

As a student with years of education experience, you know that communication is far more than the transmission of information. The exchange of messages and information is important for many reasons, but it is not enough to meet the various needs we have as human beings. While the content of our communication may help us achieve certain physical and instrumental needs, it also feeds into our identities and relationships in ways that far exceed the content of what we say.

Physical needs include needs that keep our bodies and minds functioning like air, food, water, and sleep. Communication, which we most often associate with our brain, mouth, eyes, and ears, actually has many more connections to and effects on our physical body and well-being. At the most basic level, communication can alert others that our physical needs are not being met. Even babies cry when they are hungry or sick to alert their caregiver of the need to satisfy physical needs. Current research indicates that social connection has a huge impact on longevity, our immune systems, and other aspects of physical health (Seppala, et al., 2014).

Instrumental needs Include needs that help us get things done in our day-to-day lives and achieve short- and long-term goals. We all have short- and long-term goals that we work on every day. Fulfilling these goals is an ongoing communicative task, which means we spend much of our time communicating for instrumental needs. Some common instrumental needs include influencing others, getting information we need, or securing support (Burleson, Metts, & Kirch, 2000). An example could be when Jeon tries to persuade his roommate to turn down his music because he is studying. In this instance, Jeon is using communication to meet an instrumental need.

Relational needs include needs that help us maintain social bonds and interpersonal relationships. Communicating to fill our instrumental needs helps us function on many levels, but communicating for relational needs helps us achieve the social relating that is an essential part of being human. Communication meets our relational needs by giving us a tool through which to develop, maintain, and end relationships.

Identity needs include our need to present ourselves to others and be thought of in particular and desired ways. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Are you funny, smart, loyal, or quirky? Your answer isn't just based on who you think you are, since much of how we think of ourselves is based on our communication with other people. Our identity changes as we progress through life, but communication is the primary means of establishing our identity and fulfilling our identity needs.

NO COMMUNICATION = NO COMMUNITY

Throughout history, one of the most severe forms of social punishment has been excommunication - complete banishment from the community. In Catholic tradition, this involves formally casting someone out of the Church. Ancient Rome practice a similar form of exclusion known as ostracism, where citizens used clay shards (ostraca) to vot for an individual to be expelled from the city for ten years. In contemporary Amish communities, a related practice called shunnng allows the individual to remain physically present but prohibits all social interaction with others (Remland et al., 2014, p. 9).

Communication is a process

Communication can be defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson & Nelson, 2000. When we refer to communication as a process, we imply that it doesn't have a distinct beginning and end or follow a predetermined sequence of events. It can be difficult to trace the origin of a communication encounter, since communication doesn't always follow a neat and discernible format, which makes studying communication interactions or phenomena difficult. Models of communication simplify the process by providing a visual representation of the various aspects of a communication encounter. Models allow us to see specific concepts and steps within the process of communication, define communication, and apply communication concepts.

However, any time we pull one part of the process out for study or closer examination, we artificially "freeze" the process in order to examine it, which is not something that is possible when communicating in real life. Doing that changes the very process itself, and by the time you have examined a particular stage or component of the process, the entire process may have changed. Still, communication models are useful for scholarly interrogation of the communication process, and they can also help us evaluate our own communication practices, troubleshoot a problematic encounter we had, or slow things down to account for various contexts before we engage in communication (Dance & Larson, 1976).

Although models of the communication process differ, they all contain some common elements such as participants, messages, encoding, decoding, and channels. In communication models, the **participants** are the senders and/or receivers of messages in a communication encounter. The **message** is the verbal or nonverbal content being conveyed from sender to receiver. For example, when you say "Hello!" to your friend, you are sending a message of greeting that will be received by your friend.

The internal cognitive processes that allow participants to send, receive, and understand messages are the encoding process and decoding process. **Encoding** is the process of turning thoughts into communication. As we will learn later, the level of conscious thought that goes into encoding messages varies. **Decoding** is the process of turning communication into thoughts. For example, you may realize you're hungry and encode the following message to send to your roommate: "I'm hungry. Do you want to get pizza tonight?" As your roommate receives the message, he decodes what you are expressing to him and turns it back into thoughts in order to make meaning out of it. Of course, we don't just communicate verbally—we have various options, or channels for communication.

Transactional Model of Communication

As the study of communication has progressed, models have expanded to account for more of the communication process. Many scholars view communication as more than a process that is used to carry on conversations and convey meaning. We don't send messages like computers, and we don't neatly alternate between the roles of sender and receiver as an interaction unfolds. We also can't consciously decide to stop communicating, because communication is more than sending and receiving messages.

The **transactional model of communication** describes communication as a process in which communicators create meaning and shared realities within social, relational, and cultural contexts. In this model, we don't just communicate to exchange messages; we communicate to create relationships, form intercultural partnerships, shape our self-concepts, and engage with others in dialog to create communities. In short, we don't communicate about our realities; communication helps to construct our realities.

Communication is best understood as a **transactional process**, meaning that the people involved are communicators who both send and receive messages at the same time. In earlier models, these roles were separated into *sender* (or encoder) and *receiver* (or decoder), but real interactions rarely unfold in such a linear way. Even when we are silent, we communicate through posture, facial expressions, and tone; and even while speaking, we take in information from others through their reactions and feedback. For example, on a first date, as you send verbal messages about your interests and background, your date reacts nonverbally. You don't wait until you are done sending your verbal message to start receiving and decoding the nonverbal messages of your date. Instead, you are simultaneously sending your verbal message and receiving your date's nonverbal messages. This is an important component to the model because it allows us to understand how we are able to adapt our communication—for example, a verbal message—in the middle of sending it based on the communication we are simultaneously receiving from our communication partner.

A **message** is the information being communicated, and it can be verbal or nonverbal. Every message carries both a **content level**—the literal information—and a **relational level**, which conveys how we feel about the other person or the situation. Relational meaning is often communicated nonverbally through cues such as eye contact, vocal tone, or physical distance. **Feedback** is the receiver's response to the message, such as nodding, asking a question, or laughing at a joke. Feedback helps communicators adjust and clarify their messages in real time.

Communication is also influenced by **noise**, or anything that interferes with the transmission or interpretation of a message. *Internal (psychological) noise* includes thoughts, biases, stereotypes, or emotional reactions that shape how we interpret others. *External (physical) noise* includes environmental distractions like loud music or a ringing phone. *Semantic noise* occurs when the message is heard but not understood, often due to language differences, technical jargon, or slang. Messages travel through a **channel**, such as face-to-face conversation, texting, email, or video calls, and the choice of channel can shape how the message is interpreted. All communication occurs within a **context**, which includes the time, location, and nature of the relationship. Finally, each communicator brings a unique **field of experience**—their culture, identity, education, values, and personal history—which influences how they send, receive, and interpret messages.

Consider Samuel a Nigerian international student attending a community college in Los Angeles. On his first day of class, he approaches her professor after lecture to ask a question. As the **sender**, he encodes his message using the direct but respectful communication style he learned at home. The professor, as the **receiver**, decodes his message through her own field of experience, which includes U.S. cultural norms and expectations about student-teacher interactions.

During their conversation, both are simultaneously sending and receiving messages. **Samuel** speaks verbally, but he also communicates nonverbally through his posture and facial expressions. The professor provides feedback by nodding, smiling, and asking clarifying questions. However, several forms of noise may affect their interaction. The hallway is loud with students changing classes (external noise). The professor may unconsciously form impressions based on **Samuel's** accent (internal noise). **Samuel** may not understand a slang phrase the professor uses, such as "no worries" or "you're all good" (semantic noise).

Their interaction also depends on the channel—a face-to-face conversation—and the context, which includes the academic setting and the power dynamic between student and professor. Both bring their fields of experience into the exchange: **Samuel's** Nigerian cultural background, multilingual upbringing, and experiences adjusting to U.S. norms, and the professor's American educational background and expectations for student communication. Together, these elements illustrate how communication is a dynamic, transactional process shaped by culture, context, and individual experience.



Figure 1.3.1: The Transactional Model of Communication

The transactional model also includes an important understanding of context. Since the transaction model of communication views communication as a force that shapes our realities before and after specific interactions occur, it must account for contextual influences outside of a single interaction. To do this, the transactional model considers how social, relational, and cultural contexts frame and influence our communication encounters.

Social context refers to the stated rules or unstated norms that guide communication. As we are socialized into our various communities, we learn rules and implicitly pick up on norms for communicating. Some common rules that influence social contexts include: don't lie to people, don't interrupt people, don't pass people in line, greet people when they greet you, thank people when they pay you a compliment, and so on. Parents and teachers often explicitly convey these rules to their children or students. Rules may be stated over and over, and there may be punishment for not following them. Norms are social conventions that we pick up on through observation, practice, and trial and error. We may not even know we are breaking a social norm until we notice people looking at us strangely or someone corrects or teases us. For example, as a new employee you may over- or underdress for the company's holiday party because you don't know the norm for formality. Although there probably isn't a stated rule about how to dress at the holiday party, you will notice your error without someone having to point it out, and you will likely not deviate from the norm again in order to save yourself any potential embarrassment. Even though breaking social norms doesn't result in the formal punishment that might be a consequence of breaking a social rule, the social awkwardness we feel when we violate social norms is usually enough to teach us that these norms are powerful even though they aren't made explicit like rules. Norms even have the power to override social rules in some situations. To go back to the examples of common social rules mentioned before, we may break the rule about not lying if the lie is meant to save someone from feeling hurt. We often interrupt close friends when we're having an exciting conversation, but we wouldn't be as likely to interrupt a professor while they

are lecturing. Since norms and rules vary among people and cultures, relational and cultural contexts are also included in the transaction model in order to help us understand the multiple contexts that influence our communication.

Relational context includes the previous interpersonal history and type of relationship we have with a person. We communicate differently with someone we just met versus someone we've known for a long time. Initial interactions with people tend to be more highly scripted and governed by established norms and rules, but when we have an established relational context, we may be able to bend or break social norms and rules more easily. For example, you would likely follow social norms of politeness and attentiveness and might spend the whole day cleaning the house for the first time you invite your new neighbors to visit. Once the neighbors are in your house, you may also make them the center of your attention during their visit. If you end up becoming friends with your neighbors and establishing a relational context, you might not think as much about having everything cleaned and prepared or even giving them your whole attention during later visits. Since communication norms and rules also vary based on the type of relationship people have, relationship type is also included in relational context. For example, there are certain communication rules and norms that apply to a supervisor-supervisee relationship that don't apply to a brother-sister relationship and vice versa. Just as social norms and relational history influence how we communicate, so does culture.

Cultural context includes various aspects of identities such as race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and ability. We will learn more about these identities in other chapters, but for now it is important for us to understand that whether we are aware of it or not, we all have multiple cultural identities that influence our communication. Western culture tends to put more value on senders than receivers and on the content rather the context of a message whereas Eastern cultures tend to communicate with the listener in mind. As we will learn in the next chapter, cultures vary in terms of having a more individualistic or more collectivistic cultural orientation. The United States is considered an **individualistic culture**, where emphasis is put on individual expression and success. Japan is considered a **collectivistic culture**, where emphasis is put on group cohesion and harmony. These are strong cultural values that are embedded in how we learn to communicate. In many collectivistic cultures, there is more emphasis placed on silence and nonverbal context. Some people, especially those with identities that have been historically marginalized, are regularly aware of how their cultural identities influence their communication and influence how others communicate with them. Conversely, people with identities that are dominant or in the majority may rarely, if ever, think about the role their cultural identities play in their communication. Whether in the United States, Japan, or another country, people are socialized from birth to communicate in culturally specific ways that vary by context. When cultural context comes to the forefront of a communication encounter, it can be difficult to manage. Since intercultural communication creates uncertainty, it can deter people from communicating across cultures or lead people to view intercultural communication as negative. But if you avoid communicating across cultural identities, you will likely not get more comfortable or competent as a communicator. "Difference," isn't a bad thing. In fact, intercultural communication has the potential to enrich various aspects of our lives. In order to communicate well within various cultural contexts, it is important to keep an open mind and avoid making assumptions about others' cultural identities. While you may be able to identify some aspects of the cultural context within a communication encounter, there may also be cultural influences that you can't see. A competent communicator shouldn't assume to know all the cultural contexts a person brings to an encounter, since not all cultural identities are visible. As with the other contexts, it requires skill to adapt to shifting contexts, and the best way to develop these skills is through practice and reflection.

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1.5: A Very Brief History of Intercultural Communication

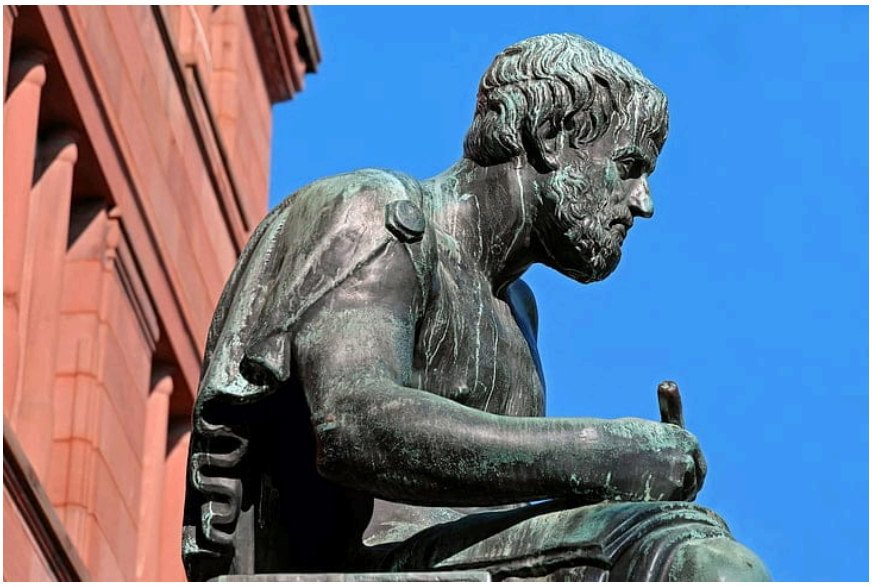


Figure 1.5.1: Bronze Statue of Aristotle

The study of communication is often described as one of the oldest academic traditions in the world, with roots stretching back more than 2,000 years to Aristotle, who offered the first systematic framework for understanding how messages influence audiences. In the modern era, Wilbur Schramm helped transform communication into a formal academic discipline by establishing the first doctoral program in 1948 at the University of Illinois, laying the foundation for the departments and research centers we see today. As the field expanded, scholars began examining how culture shapes the way people interpret and respond to messages, leading to the development of Intercultural Communication, a vibrant area of study shaped significantly by Edward T. Hall's pioneering work in the 1950s. And of course, Communication Studies doesn't stand alone; philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology remain our close academic cousins, each offering insights that deepen our understanding of human interaction.

As you read this section, consider this: **why has communication remained an enduring field of study for more than two millennia?**

The "Hidden" Origins: the Birth of a Field and Edward T. Hall

While communication has ancient roots, the specific subfield of Intercultural Communication (ICC) emerged from a very practical, post-World War II need: helping people from vastly different backgrounds work together without misunderstanding. During the time after World War II, the roots of the field of Intercultural Communication began to grow in both the United States and Japan, with a strong emphasis on nonverbal elements of communication. In the next decade, intercultural communication began to grow in Europe, but with a greater emphasis on language and linguistic elements. In the United States, Edward T. Hall, often considered the founder of the field, was an anthropologist whose unique life experiences allowed him to see what others missed.

Before he became the "father" of ICC, Hall's worldview was shaped by immersive cultural experiences that were rare for his time. In the 1930s, Hall worked for the U.S. Indian Service, building roads and dams with construction crews on Navajo and Hopi reservations (Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002). It was here that he first realized that fundamental concepts, like how we view time or how we use physical space, were not universal truths, but cultural constructs.

This view was deepened during World War II, when Hall served as a commanding officer over an African American regiment in Europe and the Philippines (Rogers et al., 2002). This experience was transformative; leading men from a different racial and cultural background during a period of intense conflict allowed Hall to view his own "white culture" from the outside (Hall, 1992, as cited in Rogers et al., 2002). These years on the front lines and on the reservations taught Hall that culture is often "silent." It isn't just about the food we eat or the clothes we wear; it is about the invisible, unconscious rules that govern how we act and feel.

The Four Pillars of Intercultural Theory

When Hall began formalizing the study of intercultural communication between 1951 and 1955 at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. Department of State, he didn't just invent a new subject. Instead, he pulled insights from four distinct "academic cousins" to create a multidisciplinary framework (Rogers et al., 2002; Martin, Nakayama, & Carbaugh, (2020).

1. **Cultural Anthropology:** This provided the foundation for understanding culture as a complex, lived experience. Influences from Cultural Anthropology include Margaret Mead, Ruth Beneditct, Gregory Bateson, and Clyde Kuckholm.
2. **Linguistics:** Collaborating with linguists like George L. Trager, Hall applied the structure of language to human behavior. He argued that just as language has a "grammar," culture has a "grammar" of behavior that can be analyzed and taught (Rogers et al., 2002). Influences include George Trager, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf.
3. **Ethology (The Study of Animal Behavior):** Hall was fascinated by how animals mark their territory. He applied this to humans to create the study of **proxemics**—the study of how humans use space (Hall, 1992, as cited in Rogers et al., 2002). He realized that different cultures have different "bubbles" of personal space, and violating those bubbles causes instant, often unconscious, discomfort. Influences include here include Charles Darwin.
4. **Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory:** From Sigmund Freud, Hall borrowed the concept of the "unconscious." He argued that most of our cultural behavior is "out of awareness" (Rogers et al., 2002). We don't realize we are performing our culture until we encounter someone who does things differently.

From the Foreign Service to a Global Movement

The real "birth" of the field happened at the FSI. The institute was tasked with training American diplomats who were being sent abroad during the Cold War. These diplomats were often intellectually brilliant but socially "clumsy" in foreign contexts. They might understand a country's political history, but fail because they didn't know how long a "pause" in conversation should last or how much eye contact was appropriate.

Hall and his colleagues shifted the focus from "macro" anthropology (the study of entire civilizations) to "micro" communication (the actual interaction between two people). In 1959, Hall published his most famous book, *The Silent Language*, which officially introduced the term "intercultural communication" to the world (Rogers et al., 2002).

Interestingly, this wasn't just an American effort. As the U.S. was developing these theories, scholars in Japan were grappling with similar issues. Following WWII, Japan's reintegration into the global community necessitated a deep dive into how traditional Japanese values interacted with Western communication styles. This cross-pollination between U.S. and Japanese scholars helped ensure that ICC wasn't just a Western perspective, but a truly global discipline (Rogers et al., 2002).

Why This History Matters to You Today

You might be wondering: "I'm a college student in a digital world; why do I need to know about a 1950s diplomat trainer?"

The answer lies in what scholars call the "Contact Zone." We live in a world "on the move." Today, more than 214 million people live outside their country of birth, and nearly a billion people cross international borders every year for travel or business (Jackson, 2012). Whether you are working in a multinational tech firm, a diverse city hospital, or a local school, you are constantly entering "contact zones" where different cultural histories, identities, and power structures meet.

Modern Intercultural Communication has evolved since Hall's time. Today, it doesn't just offer "tips for travelers"; it examines the complex relationship between language, culture, identity, and power (Jackson, 2012). Understanding the history of ICC helps you develop:

- **Self-Awareness:** By learning about Hall's "silent language," you realize that your own "normal" is just one version of reality.
- **Critical Thinking:** Modern ICC looks at culture as a "site of struggle" (Jackson, 2012). You begin to see how systems of privilege and history shape who gets to speak and who is listened to in any given conversation.
- **Functional Fitness:** In a globalized economy, the ability to adapt your communication style—what scholars call "intercultural communication competence"—is no longer a luxury; it's a requirement for success (Jackson, 2012).

By understanding where this field came from—born out of the necessity of the post-WWII era and built on the lived experiences of soldiers, anthropologists, and linguists—you gain the tools to navigate our hyper-connected world. You begin to see the "silent language" all around you. You realize that every interaction is an opportunity for transformation, helping you become not just a better communicator, but a more empathetic and effective global citizen.

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1.6: The Importance of Intercultural Competence

In an increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate across cultural boundaries is not just valuable—it's essential. Whether interacting with colleagues from different backgrounds, studying abroad, working in diverse communities, or navigating multicultural workplaces, effective communication across cultures is a critical skill. This ability is known as **intercultural communication competence (ICC)**—the capacity to communicate both effectively and appropriately with people from other cultural backgrounds.

ICC involves more than simply knowing about other cultures; it requires a combination of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. These include openness, curiosity, empathy, cultural self-awareness, and the ability to adapt communication styles to fit different cultural contexts. Without these competencies, even well-intentioned interactions can result in misunderstandings, frustration, or unintentional offense. As societies become more interconnected, developing ICC becomes crucial not just for successful relationships, but also for promoting inclusion, reducing conflict, and working toward global understanding.

In the next chapter, we will explore ICC in greater detail, examining the specific components that make someone interculturally competent. We'll look at key skills, common barriers, and real-world examples that highlight why competence in this area matters more than ever in our personal, academic, and professional lives.

📱 Spotlight on Social Media: Why Study Intercultural Communication?

In today's hyperconnected digital landscape, platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as global meeting grounds where users from vastly different cultural backgrounds interact in real time. These interactions range from sharing memes and participating in viral challenges to debating political issues and forming online communities. While this digital exchange offers unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural connection, it also introduces significant risks: without intercultural awareness, online communication can easily result in misinterpretation, stereotyping, or even digital conflict.

For example, humor that resonates in one culture may be perceived as offensive in another. A gesture, emoji, or phrase might carry vastly different meanings depending on cultural context. Even silence or delayed responses can be misread—some cultures value quick replies as a sign of engagement, while others interpret pauses as thoughtful reflection. These subtle differences, when overlooked, can fracture online relationships and reinforce cultural biases.

Studying intercultural communication equips us to navigate these complexities with empathy and insight. It helps us recognize our own cultural filters—those unconscious assumptions and expectations shaped by our upbringing, language, and social norms—and understand how they influence the way we interpret others. Through this lens, we learn to decode diverse communication styles, appreciate cultural nuance, and respond with respect and curiosity rather than judgment.

Intercultural competence is especially vital in digital spaces where tone, facial expressions, and context cues are often absent. Whether you're commenting on a global trend, collaborating with peers abroad, or moderating an online discussion, these skills transform surface-level interaction into meaningful connection. As Remland, Jones, and Brinkman (2014) emphasize, intercultural communication is not just about avoiding conflict—it's about building peace, fostering inclusion, and creating dialogue that bridges cultural divides.

🧠 Discussion Questions

1. Think of a time when a social media post or comment was misunderstood due to cultural differences. What could have helped clarify the message?
2. How might intercultural communication skills improve the way influencers or brands engage with global audiences?
3. What role does empathy play in responding to culturally sensitive topics online?

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1.7: Conclusion

This chapter introduces students to the foundations of intercultural communication by grounding abstract concepts in real experiences. Through stories, readers see how communication shapes relationships across cultural boundaries—from classrooms at CSU Fullerton to Peace Corps service in Ghana. The chapter explains why studying intercultural communication matters, using examples like Jordan's sushi experience in Japan and David J. Smith's global village model to illustrate how cultural nuances, global inequalities, and media exposure influence our perceptions. It also defines culture as a dynamic, learned system of shared values, beliefs, and symbols shaped by history, social forces, and personal experience, emphasizing that cultures are fluid and diverse even within the same nation.

Building on this foundation, the chapter explores how communication works through the transactional model, showing that meaning is co-created through context, feedback, and individual identities—and that cultural differences can introduce "noise" into the process. A historical perspective highlights how intersecting social factors and systems of inequality shape cultural identity and communication patterns, encouraging readers to think critically about privilege and power. The chapter concludes by underscoring the importance of intercultural communication competence (ICC) in a globalized, digitally connected world. Skills such as empathy, adaptability, and cultural awareness help individuals navigate misunderstandings and connect more effectively across cultural divides, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of ICC in the next chapter.

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2: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

Learning Objectives

- Define intercultural competence and explain its significance in today's intercultural world
- Compare and contrast different models of intercultural communication
- Explain the staircase model of competence
- Summarize key criteria of intercultural competence
- Understand the communication skills that contribute to intercultural competence

2.1: Intercultural Communication Competence

2.2: Intercultural Competence Models

2.3: Staircase Model of Competence

2.4: Criteria for Intercultural Competence

2.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills- Navigating Intercultural Encounters

2.6: Conclusion

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2.1: Intercultural Communication Competence

Cultural Connection: The Iced Coffee



Figure 2.1.1: Friends enjoying coffee at an outdoor cafe in Frankfurt, Germany

While vacationing in Germany with my family, we strolled through a picturesque park and garden before stopping at a café with a to-go window. My daughter wanted an iced coffee—coffee with ice and milk—so I confidently placed my order using my best rehearsed German: “Ich möchte etwas Eis Café.”

The server looked at me quizzically, then informed me it would take a few minutes, gesturing sternly for us to sit on a nearby bench. My daughters and I settled in to wait, though I had a lingering suspicion that I had made a mistake—I just wasn’t sure what it was.

As we waited, realization dawned. Germans rarely put ice in their beverages, and the word “Eis” actually means ice cream! Instead of ordering an iced coffee, I had unknowingly requested a coffee with ice cream. I realized that even though one can carefully prepare for intercultural encounters, misunderstandings can occur. Thankfully, my daughter enjoyed the ice cream and coffee very much!

Angela, Communication Studies Professor

Introduction

Whether it’s ordering coffee abroad or collaborating in a diverse classroom, even simple interactions can go awry when cultural expectations clash. The story you just read is more than a travel mishap—it’s a reminder that communication is shaped by invisible norms, assumptions, and habits we often take for granted. In today’s globalized world, developing intercultural communication competence isn’t just helpful—it’s essential. This chapter will guide you through key concepts and models that help us recognize our own biases, adapt our communication styles, and engage respectfully across cultural boundaries. You’ll explore how attitudes, knowledge, and skills work together to build competence, and how self-awareness and reflection can transform misunderstandings into meaningful connections. To begin, let’s examine two barriers to intercultural understanding: cultural bumps and ethnocentrism.

Cultural Bumps

Cultural bumps are small misunderstandings that are caused by cultural differences and communication (Ting-Tommey & Chung, 2022). Communicating with people who are similar to ourselves can be challenging in the best relationships. However, communicating with people we perceive as different (we shall call them strangers) can feel downright impossible at times.



Figure 2.1.2: US President Obama greeting French President Macron

What daily behaviors contribute to misunderstandings in intercultural encounters?

- Language: Not speaking or a lack of familiarity with dialects and jargon can shape how we communicate and serve as a barrier.
- Culture: Our cultural upbringing serves as our lens to view and understand the world.
- Norms: Guidelines for how to behave in a culture, often grounded in morals and values, can create some surprising bumps.
- Rules: Guidelines for how to communicate in a culture, such as how to greet people, make requests, or express disagreement, are often taken for granted and can lead to some cultural confusion.
- Symbols: Objects, gestures, or words that carry specific cultural meaning (e.g., flags, emojis, clothing). For example, in the US the thumbs up gesture is considered positive, but in many places in the world it is an insult gesture.
- Expectations (our personal beliefs about how people should behave, how we should behave, and what we think will happen). Our expectations regarding how people from other cultures and ethnic groups should behave are based on how we categorize them (she is Japanese, he is black, they are Mexicans).
- Stereotypes affect our communication with strangers. Stereotypes, however, are less problematic in our communication with people from our own groups because they are usually more accurate and favorable than stereotypes of other groups.

When these elements differ across cultures, even simple interactions—like eye contact, tone of voice, or personal space—can lead to misunderstanding. These bumps aren't failures; they're opportunities to pause, reflect, and learn. While cultural bumps are often accidental, they can escalate when we assume our own cultural norms are the "right" way to behave. This mindset is called **ethnocentrism**—the belief that one's own culture is superior or more correct than others.

Ethnocentrism

At its core, **ethnocentrism** is the tendency to use our own cultural lens as the standard when evaluating the communication, values, and norms of others. The word ethnocentrism comes from ethno = world and centrism = center. It is learned and leads us to believe that our way of thinking and acting is normal, correct, and maybe even the best way. As Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) explain, an "ethnocentric mindset means staying stuck within our own cultural worldview and using our cultural values as the baseline standards to evaluate the person's cultural behavior" (p. 28). While this way of thinking may feel safe and at times comforting, it limits our ability to flexibly respond when communicating with people who are culturally different. Alternatively, we

should work to adapt an **ethnorelative mindset,** meaning we should try to understand communication behaviors from the other person's cultural perspective (Bennett & Bennett, 2004).

Whether you are traveling abroad, building a relationship with someone from another culture, or collaborating with diverse classmates and colleagues, the ability to be flexible and adapt your communication to different cultural contexts is essential. The ability to be sensitive to unique cultural variations in cultures and communicate effectively is the heart of this chapter.

Student Voices



Figure 2.1.3: Visiting Spain, photo by Samuel Sanchez.

Insights on Ethnocentrism

During my 2025 summer vacation, I took my first international flight to Barcelona, Spain; it was a whopping 13-hour flight. I was happy to travel for leisure, but I did not consider the effects of cultural variations. Whether it was the stares I was receiving while walking on the street, or the manner with which I was waited on at a restaurant, I could not help but feel as if something was wrong. Where I was in the world, I knew to be a tourist hotspot, so I expected familiarity. My expectations for servers included smiles and constant reassurance (like that in the USA), but I was met with a more reserved style, which at first seemed unpleasant. It was without difficulty that I imagined the people in Barcelona—locals and tourists alike—to not be behaving properly, and I found myself irritated in response to that fact because I would never act in such a way. I would not mind an eccentric fashion choice I witnessed out in public. I would greet customers with a bubbly attitude and a bright smile—even if it was forced—had I been waiting on a group at a restaurant. Then it hit me that all of the things I wanted others to do were all of the things that I would do, and I realized that I was no longer in Los Angeles. I was in the midst of another culture, and I was in a tourist hotspot, where it was wrong to expect familiarity, and where a myriad of cultures interact. Other people in Barcelona were not living incorrectly or inappropriately; they were simply living differently. It hit me soon after that that I should not be discouraged by another because of their fashion preferences, and I should have considered the fact that the style of service at a restaurant was different from one city to another and even less alike from one country to the next. I learned that I should travel with an open mind, and imagine that certain looks from another person, or particular differences in interaction, are not inherently negative; they are merely diverse.

Samuel Sanchez, California Community College Transfer Student and English Major

Communication Competence

People who have developed good communication skills are often described as having communication competence. Communicating effectively, along with writing and critical thinking, is often considered one of the key skills of gaining a college

education. To have **communication competence** means that “we have knowledge of effective and appropriate communication patterns and the ability to use and adapt that knowledge in various contexts” (Cooley & Roach, 1984).

The National Communication Association (NCA) has developed guidelines for what it means to be a competent communicator (1999). They include:

1. State ideas clearly.
2. Communicate ethically.
3. Recognize when it is appropriate to communicate.
4. Identify their communication goals.
5. Select the most appropriate and effective medium for communicating.
6. Demonstrate credibility.
7. Identify and manage misunderstandings.
8. Manage conflict.
9. Be open-minded about another’s point of view.
10. Listen attentively.

While communication competence in the United States is undeniably important, today's increasingly interconnected world demands more than just effective communication—it requires **intercultural competence** to navigate diverse communities with sensitivity, awareness, and adaptability. Consider Maya, a California State University and community college graduate, who now works in her dream job managing public relations for an e-sports team at a major gaming company. Her role has taken her across the globe—Korea, Thailand, Germany, and Canada—introducing her to a range of cultural contexts. Though Maya possesses outstanding communication skills, each new country has challenged her to expand her skill set, adjusting to distinct customs, communication styles, and social expectations.

Whether working abroad or at home, we all encounter situations where we must communicate across cultural differences. Recognizing and embracing these moments allows us to foster deeper understanding, strengthen relationships, and adapt to the evolving global landscape.

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2.2: Intercultural Competence Models



Figure 2.2.1: People standing on a globe.

What skills are essential for effective communication across cultures? Scholars from multiple disciplines have explored this question, developing frameworks to help individuals better understand and navigate intercultural interactions. Read on to discover popular models and consider which approach is meaningful to you.

Intercultural Awareness: Cross-cultural or intercultural awareness comprises sensitivity and respect towards other people's culture, and having an understanding of people from different cultures. (According to Barrett, Byram, L´az´a, MompointGaillard, and Philippou, 2013).

Intercultural Sensitivity: From the field of intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity is "an individual's ability to develop emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p. 5).

Cultural Intelligence (CQ): Emerging from international business fields, cultural intelligence is "defined as an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings" (Ng, Van Dyne, & Ang, 2012, p. 32).

Cultural Humility: From the medical field, "cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, to redressing the power imbalances in the physician-patient dynamic, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations" (p. 123).

Flexible Intercultural Communication: Emphasizes the importance of integrating knowledge and an open-minded attitude and putting them into adaptive and creative practice in everyday communication (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 28)

Intercultural Competence: From the field of Communication Studies, intercultural competence is understood "as an impression that a behavior is appropriate and effective in a given context." (Spitzberg, 2000, p. 279).

As we can see from above, key themes emerge from the different intercultural frameworks, including awareness, respect, sensitivity, appreciation, appropriateness, and effectiveness. While building any form of competence requires effort, building intercultural communication competence often requires us to take more risks. Some of these risks require us to leave our comfort zones and adapt to new and uncertain situations. What it means to be competent will vary depending on your physical location, your role (personal, professional, etc.), and your life stage, among other things. Sometimes we will know or be able to figure out what is expected of us in a given situation, but sometimes we may need to act in unexpected ways to meet the needs of a situation. Competence enables us to better cope with the unexpected, adapt to the non-routine, and connect to uncommon frameworks. How can intercultural communication competence be built and achieved? This is a key question we will address in this section.Intercultural communication competence is less about a list of rules and more about a box of tools. Three ways to

cultivate intercultural communication competence are to foster attitudes that motivate us, discover knowledge that informs us, and develop skills that enable us (Bennett, 2009).

We are not just born with intercultural communication competence. As noted previously, intercultural competence consists of knowledge and skills that can be built over time. To better understand this process, let's turn our attention to the Staircase Model of Competence.

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2.3: Staircase Model of Competence

In 1982, scholar Howell introduced a model of communication competence that illustrates how individuals evolve in their understanding of communication—both their own preferences and those of others—as they build greater awareness, adaptability, and flexibility in intercultural interactions. As you explore the staircase model of competence, consider your own communication experiences and how you may have moved between different levels depending on the context, culture, or moment. He proposed that there were four levels of intercultural communication competence based on competent and incompetent communication as well as conscious or unconscious communication. **Unconscious incompetence** is the "be yourself" approach. This person may not have a strong knowledge of cultural differences and does not see any need to accommodate differences in communication styles or culture. They may not even be aware they are communicating in an incompetent manner. Once people learn more about culture and communication, they may become **conscious incompetent.** This is where they have the vocabulary to identify the concepts and know what they should be doing, but realize they are not communicating as well as they could, or they lack the communication skills necessary to achieve their goals. Many of us have experienced the feeling that something isn't quite right, yet we can't quite figure out what went wrong. As communication skills increase, and the focus is on cultural concepts and communication styles, you become a **conscious competent** communicator. You are learning a variety of new communication skills and know that you are communicating well in the moment, and you can add this memory to your growing bank of successful intercultural interactions. Reaching this level is important, but not the pinnacle of competent communication. **Unconscious competence** is the level to achieve. Unconscious competence means that you can communicate successfully without straining to be competent. At this point, all the knowledge and previous experiences have been put into practice, and you rarely have to intently focus on your intercultural interactions because it has become second nature. You have developed the skills needed to be competent.

Staircase Model of Competence



Levels of Competence

Unconscious Incompetence: Individuals have little awareness of cultural differences or communication styles, unaware of mistakes.

Conscious Incompetence: Awareness of limitations and cultural differences - knows what should be done but struggles to apply skills effectively

Conscious Competence: Actively applies communication strategies, successfully engages in intercultural interactions with effort and awareness.

Unconscious Competence: Communication is second-nature. Mastery is achieved when skills become automatic and performed effortlessly without conscious thought.

Cultural Close-Up: 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. She recounts seeing a picture on the front of the newspaper with three men who appeared Latino. She found

herself wondering what they had done, and then found out from the caption that they were the relatives of people who died in a car crash. She identified that as a TUI moment and asked herself if she would have had the same thought if they had been black, white, Asian, or female. When we feel "surprised" by someone different, this often points to a preexisting negative assumption that we can unpack and learn from. Allen also found herself surprised when a panelist at a conference who used a wheelchair and was hearing impaired made witty comments. Upon reflection, she realized that she had an assumption that people with disabilities would have a gloomy outlook on life. While these examples focus on out-groups, she also notes that it's important for people, especially in nondominant groups, to monitor their thoughts about their own group, as they may have internalized negative attitudes about their group from the dominant culture. As a black woman, she notes that she has been critical of black people who "do not speak mainstream English" based on stereotypes she internalized about race, language, and intelligence. It is not automatically a bad thing to TUI. Even Brenda Allen, an accomplished and admirable scholar of culture and communication, catches herself doing it. When we notice that we TUI, it's important to reflect on that moment and try to adjust our thinking processes. This is an ongoing process, but it is an easy-to-remember way to cultivate your intercultural communication competence. Keep a record of instances where you catch yourself "thinking under the influence" and answer the following questions:

What triggers you to TUI?

1. Where did these influences on your thoughts come from?
2. What concepts from this chapter can you apply to change your thought processes?

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2.4: Criteria for Intercultural Competence



Figure 2.4.1: Cartoon image of friends greeting one another while speaking different languages.

Overview

Now that you've explored Howell's staircase model of intercultural communication competence, you've seen how individuals progress from unaware and sometimes ineffective communication to intuitive, adaptive interactions across cultures. But competence isn't just a personal achievement, it's a dynamic process shaped by real-world encounters, cultural expectations, and moments of misunderstanding.

In this next section, we'll examine how intercultural communication unfolds in everyday situations. You'll explore how people interpret and respond to cultural differences, how assumptions and biases can influence interactions, and how awareness and empathy can transform even the most challenging exchanges. This section invites you to reflect on your own experiences, recognize patterns in communication across cultures, and begin building the skills to engage more thoughtfully and respectfully in diverse settings.

Specifically, we'll focus on three foundational components of intercultural competence:

- **Motivation** – cultivating curiosity, openness, and a genuine desire to connect
- **Knowledge** – understanding cultural norms, values, and communication styles
- **Skills** – applying strategies for effective and respectful interaction

Motivation

To foster attitudes that motivate us, we must develop **a sense of wonder** about culture. This sense of wonder can lead to feeling overwhelmed, humbled, or awed (Opdal, 2001). This sense of wonder may correlate to a **high tolerance for uncertainty,** which can help us turn potentially frustrating experiences we have into teachable moments. 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. (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Put simply, if a person isn't motivated to communicate with people from different cultures, then the components of intercultural communication competence discussed next don't really matter. If a person has a healthy curiosity that drives him or her toward intercultural encounters in order to learn more about self and others, then there is a foundation from which to build additional competence-relevant attitudes and skills. This **intrinsic motivation** makes

intercultural communication a voluntary, rewarding, and lifelong learning process. While intrinsic motivation captures an idealistic view of intercultural communication as rewarding in its own right, many contexts create extrinsic motivation. **Extrinsic motivation** for intercultural communication is driven by the desire for an outside reward, like money, power, or recognition. While both types of motivation can contribute to intercultural communication competence, tolerance for uncertainty may further enhance or impede a person's motivation to communicate across cultures.

Let's return to Maya to explore these concepts further. As she prepares to travel to new countries, she realizes that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors drive her motivation. For example, as a longtime fan of Korean dramas, she is thrilled to visit South Korea, excited to experience the cuisine, explore the architecture, and stock up on skincare products. At the same time, her professional responsibilities also motivate her. Learning about Korean culture is essential for excelling in her job, supporting her e-sports colleagues, ensuring a successful trip, and managing uncertainty.

Pause for Reflection:

1. Reflecting on Motivation: What factors in your own life shape your motivation to engage in intercultural communication?

2. Do you find that intrinsic or extrinsic motivation plays a stronger role in your interactions with people from different cultural backgrounds?

Understanding your motivation is important, as is recognizing that your tolerance for uncertainty can shape your willingness to explore and engage with new cultures.

Your **tolerance for uncertainty** can shape your motivation. 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. Whether communicating with someone of a different gender, race, or nationality, we are often wondering what we should or shouldn't do or say. Situations of uncertainty most often become clearer as they progress, but the anxiety that an individual with a low tolerance for uncertainty feels may lead them to leave the situation or otherwise communicate in a less competent manner. Individuals with a high tolerance for uncertainty may exhibit more patience, waiting for new information to become available or seeking out information, which may then increase the understanding of the situation and lead to a more successful outcome (Pusch, 2009). Individuals who are intrinsically motivated toward intercultural communication may have a higher tolerance for uncertainty, in that their curiosity leads them to engage with others who are different because they find the self and other-knowledge gained rewarding.

Think back to your first days as a college student. Many students feel overwhelmed by unfamiliar expectations—new schedules, campus norms, and the newfound independence of college life. At first, things may seem confusing, but over time, students who embrace the uncertainty begin to navigate their environment more confidently. Much like adjusting to college, adapting to intercultural interactions requires patience, curiosity, and a willingness to embrace what is new and unknown.

Knowledge

Motivation alone cannot create intercultural communication competence. Discovering knowledge that informs us is another step that can build on our motivation and is an important part of building intercultural communication competence. Knowledge includes self- and other-awareness, mindfulness, and cognitive flexibility. Building knowledge of our own cultures, identities, and communication patterns takes more than passive experience (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

Before moving on, let's return to Maya, who, in order to be successful in her work travels (and enjoy some sightseeing as well), will need to foster self-awareness by recognizing how her cultural background shapes her communication style. For example, she may be used to a more direct US communication style, while South Korean business culture tends to favor indirect, formal interactions. Likewise, her other-awareness is crucial. In order for Maya to be successful in work settings, she needs to understand that South Korean business interactions are rooted in Confucian values, where hierarchy and seniority play a major role in communication exchanges.

Developing cultural **self-awareness** often requires us to get out of our comfort zones. Listening to people who are different from us is a key component of developing self-knowledge. The most effective way to develop **other-awareness** is by direct and thoughtful encounters with other cultures. However, people may not readily have these opportunities for a variety of reasons.

Despite the overall diversity in the United States, many people still only interact with people who are similar to them. Even in a racially diverse educational setting, for example, people often group off with people of their own race. While a heterosexual person may have a gay or lesbian friend or relative, they likely spend most of their time with other heterosexuals. Able-bodied

people, unless they interact with people with disabilities as part of their job or have a person with a disability in their family, likely spend most of their time interacting with able-bodied people. Living in a rural area may limit one's ability to interact with a range of cultures, and most people do not travel internationally regularly. Because of this, we may have to make a determined effort to interact with people from other cultures or rely on educational sources like college classes, books, or documentaries. Learning another language is also a good way to learn about a culture, because you can then read the news or watch movies in the native language, which can offer insights that are lost in translation. It is important to note, though, that we must evaluate the credibility of the source of our knowledge, whether it is a book, a person, or another source. Also, knowledge of another language does not automatically equate to intercultural communication competence.

Developing knowledge through self- and other-awareness is an ongoing process that will continue to adapt and grow as we encounter new experiences. Mindfulness and cognitive complexity will help as we continue to build our intercultural communication competence (Pusch, 2009). **Mindfulness** is a state of self- and other-monitoring that informs later reflection on communication interactions. To put it simply, mindfulness is a process of being aware of our communication in the moment. As mindful communicators, we should ask questions that focus on the interactive process, like “How is our communication going? What are my reactions? What are their reactions?” Being able to adapt our communication in the moment based on our answers to these questions is a skill that comes with a high level of intercultural communication competence. Reflecting on the communication encounter later to see what can be learned is also a way to build intercultural communication competence. We should then be able to incorporate what we learned into our communication frameworks. One tool to increase mindfulness involves learning more about our cognitive style, or how we learn. Our cognitive style consists of our preferred patterns for “gathering information, constructing meaning, and organizing and applying knowledge” (Bennett, 2009). As we explore cognitive styles, we discover that there are differences in how people attend to and perceive the world, explain events, and use rules of logic (Nisbett, 2003). Some cultures have a cognitive style that focuses more on tasks, analytic and objective thinking, details and precision, inner direction, and independence, while others focus on relationships and people over tasks and things, concrete and metaphorical thinking, and a group consciousness and harmony. This awareness can lead to **cognitive flexibility,** which refers to the ability to continually supplement and revise existing knowledge to create new categories rather than forcing new knowledge into old categories. Cognitive flexibility helps prevent our knowledge from becoming stale and also prevents the formation of stereotypes, and can help us avoid prejudging an encounter or jumping to conclusions. In summary, to be better intercultural communicators, we should know much about others and ourselves and be able to reflect on and adapt our knowledge as we gain new experiences.

Skills

Motivation and knowledge provide the foundation necessary to identify the skills necessary for meaningful and effective communication exchange. **Intercultural communication skills** are the specific communication behaviors and abilities needed to interact with individuals from different cultures. Some of the skills important to intercultural communication competence are the ability to empathize, accumulate cultural information, listen, resolve conflict, and manage anxiety (Bennett, 2009). Again, you are already developing a foundation for these skills by reading this book, but you can expand those skills to intercultural settings with the motivation and knowledge already described. Contact with culturally different others alone does not increase intercultural skills; there must be more deliberate measures taken to fully capitalize on those encounters. While research now shows that intercultural contact does decrease prejudices, this is not enough to become interculturally competent. The ability to empathize and manage anxiety enhances prejudice reduction, and these two skills have been shown to enhance the overall impact of intercultural contact even more than acquiring cultural knowledge. There is intercultural training available for people who are interested. If you can’t access training, you may choose to research intercultural training on your own, as there are many books, articles, and manuals written on the subject.

Throughout this book, we will explore key intercultural communication skills that help individuals navigate diverse cultural interactions. These include:

- Mindfulness
- Managing uncertainty and anxiety
- Cultural empathy
- Behavioral flexibility
- Language acquisition
- Empathetic Listening
- Paraphrasing
- Confirming messages
- Responding to intercultural barriers
- Conflict negotiation

- Perception checking
- Nonverbal communication adaptability
- Conversational skills

Cultural Close Up: Intercultural Competence and Career Readiness in 2025

As you prepare for your future career, it's important to recognize that communication is not just a classroom skill—it's a professional asset. Employers in 2025 are facing a serious skills crisis. According to the *World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report* and a recent *Forbes* analysis, the rise of AI, automation, and global collaboration has created a widening talent gap (Wells, 2025). Employers are no longer just looking for degrees—they're looking for adaptable, emotionally intelligent communicators who can lead, listen, and learn across cultures and technologies.

Top 17 Skills Employers Want in 2026

Based on U.S. employer data from Forbes, here are the most in-demand skills this year:

Skills Employers Want in 2026

Skill	Employer Demand (%)
Analytical thinking	80%
Resilience, flexibility, and agility	73%
Leadership and social influence	66%
Creative thinking	63%
Motivation and self-awareness	56%
Empathy and mindful listening	56%
Curiosity and lifelong learning	54%
Technological literacy	52%
AI and big data	51%

Talent management	49%
Service orientation and customer service	49%

These skills reflect a shift toward **interdisciplinary thinking**, **emotional intelligence**, and **digital fluency**—all of which intersect with intercultural competence.

Reflection

1. **Compare and Connect**
   Review the intercultural skills discussed in this chapter (e.g., empathy, adaptability, perspective-taking, cultural self-awareness). How do they align with the top 17 skills employers are seeking? Which ones overlap? Which ones are missing?

2. **Explore the NCA Guidelines**
   The National Communication Association (NCA) outlines key components of competent communication, including ethics, adaptability, empathy, and effectiveness. Choose two NCA guidelines and explain how they relate to the Forbes skills list. How might these guidelines help you stand out in a professional setting?

3. **Career Mapping**
   Think about your intended career path. Which of the 17 skills do you already possess? Which ones do you need to strengthen? How might intercultural competence help you develop these skills in real-world contexts—such as internships, group projects, or campus leadership?

Why This Matters

Intercultural competence isn't just about navigating cultural differences—it's about becoming a flexible, thoughtful, and inclusive communicator in a rapidly changing world. Whether you're working in healthcare, business, education, or tech, your ability to listen mindfully, adapt respectfully, and lead with empathy will set you apart.

As you move forward in your academic and professional journey, remember: communication is not just a soft skill—it's a strategic one.

To frame this more clearly, we can consider the skills Maya needs to prepare for her travels. Maya has already explored motivation and **knowledge acquisition**—key foundations for intercultural competence. Now, she must focus on **developing the communication skills** necessary to interact effectively in South Korea.

From the list above, Maya may need to refine her **nonverbal communication adaptability** by adjusting her greetings, facial expressions, and body language to conform to South Korean norms. She will also benefit from **language acquisition**, learning key Korean phrases to demonstrate respect and bridge communication gaps. Additionally, understanding **facework negotiation**—the way dignity and social harmony are maintained in interactions—will help her navigate professional settings where indirect communication and hierarchy are significant. Finally, Maya will need behavioral flexibility to adjust to the new culture.

Reflective practices can also help us process through rewards and challenges associated with developing intercultural communication competence. As we open ourselves to new experiences, we are likely to have both positive and negative reactions. It can be very useful to take note of negative or defensive reactions you have. This can help you identify certain triggers that may create barriers to effective intercultural interaction. Noting positive experiences can also help you identify triggers for learning that you could seek out or recreate to enhance the positive (Bednarz, 2010). A more complex method of reflection is called intersectional reflexivity. **Intersectional reflexivity** is a reflective practice by which we acknowledge intersecting identities, both privileged and disadvantaged, and implicate ourselves in social hierarchies and inequalities (Jones Jr., 2010). This method brings in the concepts of dominant and nondominant groups and the privileges/disadvantages dialectic we discussed earlier in Chapter 2.

While formal intercultural experiences like studying abroad or volunteering for the Special Olympics or a shelter for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth can result in learning, informal experiences are also important. We may be less

likely to include informal experiences in our reflection if we don't see them as legitimate. Reflection should also include "critical incidents" or what I call "a-ha! moments." Think of reflection as a tool for meta-competence that can be useful in bringing the formal and informal together (Bednarz, 2010).

Spotlight on Social Media: The Digital Divide in 2025--Access, Equity, and Intercultural Competence

The Digital Divide in 2025: Access, Equity, and Intercultural Competence

Many college-aged individuals in 2025 have never known a world without smartphones, social media, or AI-powered search engines. As "digital natives," it may be surprising to realize how many people—both globally and within the United States—still lack access to essential technologies. The term *digital divide* originally referred to disparities in access to computers, but it has since evolved to encompass high-speed Internet access, digital literacy, and equitable participation in the digital economy (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2010).

While over 93% of Americans now use the Internet, nearly 24 million people remain offline. Globally, billions still lack reliable broadband, and those who do not have access face significant disadvantages in education, employment, healthcare, and civic engagement. In 2025, the digital divide is no longer just about physical access—it includes the *skills divide*, the *economic opportunity divide*, and the *democratic divide*.

This issue is especially urgent in the United States, where rural communities, low-income households, and historically marginalized groups remain disproportionately disconnected. For example, in Oklahoma, families like the Granstaffs waited over a decade for high-speed Internet until recent broadband grants finally reached their farm. New Mexico and Missouri are investing millions to expand public Wi-Fi and fiber infrastructure, but funding uncertainty and political shifts have disrupted progress in states like Virginia.

Intercultural competence, the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across diverse cultural contexts, is increasingly shaped by digital access. When certain communities lack reliable Internet or digital literacy, their voices are underrepresented in online spaces where global dialogue, collaboration, and cultural exchange occur. This limits opportunities to engage with diverse perspectives, share lived experiences, and participate in intercultural learning. For example, students in underconnected regions may struggle to access virtual exchange programs, global news, or multilingual resources that foster empathy and understanding. Scholars warn that without intentional digital inclusion efforts, these gaps will reinforce existing social inequalities and hinder the development of intercultural competence across educational, professional, and civic domains (Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010).

From an international perspective, the U.S. still lags behind countries like South Korea, Sweden, and Finland in broadband speed and policy innovation. In 2021, Switzerland enforced net neutrality principles, reinforcing equal access and nondiscrimination in Internet services (Borg, 2024).

In today's world, being offline means missing out on critical aspects of daily life—from paying bills and accessing telehealth, to applying for jobs, attending college classes, and participating in political movements. The Internet is no longer a luxury—it's a lifeline.

Discussion Questions

1. **How does the digital divide challenge the idea of a "global village"?**
   Reflect on who gets to participate in global conversations and how limited access affects intercultural understanding and collaboration.

2. **In what ways might limited access to technology hinder the development of intercultural competence?**
   Think about how digital exclusion affects students' ability to engage with diverse perspectives, build empathy, and navigate cross-cultural interactions.

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2.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills- Navigating Intercultural Encounters



Figure 2.5.1: A hand pointing out features on a treasure map.

Thus far in this chapter, you've explored what it means to be a competent communicator, examined Howell's staircase model of competence, and considered the importance of motivation, knowledge, and skills. You've also been introduced to a range of communication strategies that you'll continue to develop throughout this book.

At this point, the journey toward intercultural competence may feel both exciting and overwhelming. It's natural to wonder: *How much are we ethically obligated to adapt to the cultural behaviors of others?* Is flexibility always the right response? These questions are central to navigating intercultural encounters with integrity and respect.

To help guide this process, Martin and Nakamura (2025) offer a practical framework of five foundational communication skills that support intercultural competence. These skills are not just techniques, they're habits of mind that help us engage more thoughtfully across difference:

- **Become more conscious of your communication.**
  Mindfully pay attention to how your words, tone, and nonverbal cues may be interpreted by others.

- **Become more conscious of the communication of others.**
  Listen mindfully and observe with curiosity, not judgment. Take the time to try and understand, with empathy, where the others are coming from.

- **Expand your intercultural communication repertoire.**
  Learn new ways of expressing ideas, resolving conflict, and showing respect across cultures. This is what Woodman (1973) described as "trying on behavior". "Trying on behavior is always risky business. You may muff it, you may make a fool of yourself, and you'll almost always feel awkward, even though perhaps you don't appear that way" (p. 10).

- **Become more flexible in your communication.**
  Adapt your approach based on context, audience, and cultural norms. Recognize that there may be more than one right way to communicate.

- **Be an advocate for others.**
  Use your voice to support inclusion, equity, and understanding, especially when others are marginalized or misunderstood. As

> Martin and Nakamura (2025) note, “Improving relations among groups of people–whether based on ethnicity, race, gender, physical ability, or whatever difference–is not just about improving individual communication skills; it is also about forming coalitions with others” (p. 23).

These skills are not mastered overnight. They require reflection, practice, and a willingness to grow. As you continue through this textbook, you’ll have opportunities to apply these skills in real-world scenarios and consider how they connect to your personal values, academic goals, and future career.

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2.6: Conclusion

Intercultural learning is a lifelong process. In this chapter, you learned about intercultural competence, the criteria for intercultural competence, and the steps for developing intercultural competence. The content you have covered in this text is complex, challenging, and at times, confronting. As you are now aware, the idea of becoming culturally competent represents an oversimplified understanding of intercultural learning. This chapter is a starting point in developing your critical lens through which you can examine, reflect, and extract deeper learning from your intercultural experiences. Maintaining a critical perspective that is informed by an awareness of your cultural self takes practice. We encourage you to keep working on the development of your critical lens, expect to make mistakes, and reflect on your experiences. You will be able to apply these skills not only to your upcoming intercultural experience, but also throughout your personal and professional working life. Good luck and safe journey.

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3: INTERCULTURAL VALUES AND DIMENSIONS

Learning Objectives

- Explain how values function as guiding principles that shape perceptions of right and wrong, importance, and desirability
- Recognize that cultural values are often learned subconsciously and embedded in language, customs, and traditions
- Describe how shared cultural values influence behaviors, attitudes, and social norms within a community
- Analyze how cultural values can reveal fundamental differences between societies and affect intercultural interactions
- Identify and explain Hofstede's six value dimensions
- Explore Value Orientation Theory as another lens for understanding cultural differences in values and beliefs
- Recognize that intercultural communication is dynamic, relational, and often exists in the "in-between" of opposing concepts
- Reflect on how adopting a dialectical lens can deepen self-awareness and improve intercultural competence

3.1: What are cultural values?

3.2: Dimensions of Cultural Variability

3.3: Five Fundamental Value Orientations

3.4: A Dialectical Approach to Intercultural Communication

3.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Values

3.6: Conclusion

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3.1: What are cultural values?

Mind the Gap: How Power Distance Plays out in College

Coming from a high power distance culture, I was always taught to respect authority and to know my place. That mindset shaped how I interacted with my professors in college—sometimes in confusing or surprising ways. One experience was deeply positive. My undergraduate advisor, Dr. Molly Smith, was warm, caring, and an inspiring role model. Students adored her, and I felt fortunate that she agreed to mentor me. Despite her insistence that we call her by her first name, "Molly," I could never bring myself to do it. Even after graduation—when I babysat her kids, or when she attended my wedding and signed a card, "Love, Molly"—she was still "Dr. Smith" to me. Only years later did I feel grown up enough to finally call her by her first name.

Another professor left me with the opposite impression. During my first visit to his office hours, unsure of his academic title, I greeted him as "Professor Holden." To my shock, he slammed his fists on the desk and shouted, "You will refer to me as Doctor Holden! I worked hard to earn my doctorate and you will call me by the correct title!"

Both experiences reveal the same tension: power distance shapes how we perceive authority, but authority figures themselves may interpret those boundaries in very different ways. What feels respectful in one culture - or to one professor - may feel distant or even disrespectful to another.

In this chapter, we will explore these kinds of contrasts in more depth. We will look at Geert Hofstede's influential framework - including power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and other cultural dimensions - to better understand how values shape behaviors across cultures. You'll see how these values influence friendships, workplace expectations, and even how people show respect. By the end of the chapter, you will have some practical tools to better understand why people from different cultures may think and act the way they do - and how to communicate more effectively across those differences.

3.1: What Are Cultural Values?

Values and Culture

Value systems are fundamental to understanding how culture expresses itself. **Culture** can be defined as the shared patterns of behaviors, interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through socialization (Lustig & Koester, 2018). It encompasses language, customs, beliefs, and values that shape how we perceive and engage with the world.

Values are deeply felt and often serve as principles that guide people in their perceptions and behaviors. Using our values, certain ideas are judged to be right or wrong, good or bad, important or not important, desirable or not desirable. Cultural values are learned, mostly subconsciously, and are hidden deep within the language and traditions of the surrounding society (Luster & Koester, 2018). Shared cultural values form the customs, guide the behaviors, and shape the attitudes of its members. Therefore, analyzing cultural values can be a useful way to understand fundamental differences between cultures.

Geert Hofstede, sometimes called the father of modern cross-cultural science and thinking, developed a framework for comparing values across cultures. Through his research, he identified six key value dimensions (individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint) that analyze and interpret the values of a national culture (Hofstede, 1980). These dimensions influence how we communicate, form relationships, and how we respond to conflict or uncertainty. These norms can vary widely across cultures and are often the source of misunderstandings in intercultural interactions.

Ultimately, cultural values are closely tied to **worldview** - the overarching framework through which we perceive reality. Worldview encompasses assumptions about time, human nature, relationship, and the nature of truth. Because values are embedded in this framework, they influence not only how people behave but also how they interpret others' behavior. Understanding cultural values, then, is essential for developing intercultural competence and communicating effectively across cultural boundaries.

Student Voice



Figure 3.1.1: La Llorona Lego Figurines by photo Arturo (Manny) Mendoza (2025)

La Llorona and Cultural Values:

Growing up as a Mexican American in Los Angeles, if I misbehaved, my mother would scold me by saying, *"If you keep misbehaving, La Llorona WILL get you!"* She knew those haunting words would quickly get me back in line. La Llorona is a well-known story across generations in the Hispanic community, serving as a cautionary tale about choices and consequences. It warns us about the dangers of letting grief and anger control our actions.

In the story, Maria felt so betrayed by her husband's infidelity that she drowned her children and then took her own life. Because of this, she was not allowed into heaven and now wanders the earth searching for her children, unaware they are already at peace. She is doomed for eternity to walk the earth, forever seeking what she cannot find. Like a Shakespearean tragedy, La Llorona shows how betrayal and grief can lead to irreversible mistakes, instilling the cultural values of self-control, responsibility, and respect for family. La Llorona is such a well-known part of Mexican folklore that one can even purchase La Llorona Lego figurines when traveling in Mexico!

Arturo "Manny" Mendoza, Cerritos College, Film Studies Associate in Arts 2025

Comparative National Values in the 21st Century

As we learned above, values are guided by our beliefs and tell us what is right or wrong, good or bad, important or unimportant, desirable or not desirable. Like communication and culture, values are learned, often taken for granted, and can be both visible (such as symbols like the American flag for freedom) and invisible (such as work ethic), and can exist on a personal level, in family systems, at a societal level, and are different from culture to culture. Do you have a sense of your personal values? Do you have a sense of what others value?

Comparing attitudes towards values across cultures may help us better understand what individuals and cultures prioritize as important and unimportant in their communication, decision-making, and daily lives. Table 3.1.2 synthesizes data from the **World Values Survey (Wave 7) (Haerpfer, et al, 2022)** and **Schwartz's (2014) National Value Orientations**, illustrating how these "invisible" priorities differ across seven distinct cultural landscapes by showing what percentage of the surveyed population found the value to be important.

Table 3.1.2: Cultural Values Comparison Chart

Value / Priority	USA	Mexico	Brazil	China	India	Denmark	Nigeria
Family	92%	98%	96%	85%	94%	88%	97%
Religion	48%	72%	65%	3%	79%	9%	93%
Education	75%	88%	84%	92%	90%	62%	91%
Democracy	82%	61%	71%	35%	75%	95%	78%
Work Centrality	39%	55%	44%	66%	62%	21%	74%
Leisure Time	37%	42%	51%	15%	22%	49%	28%
Interpersonal Trust	38%	12%	7%	64%	32%	74%	7%
Respect for Authority	Low	High	Mod	V. High	High	V. Low	High
Environmental Care	62%	78%	82%	75%	68%	84%	52%
Gender Equality	85%	79%	82%	68%	54%	94%	45%

Table 3.1.2: Cultural Values Comparison Chart

While the data above provides a snapshot of what various cultures prioritize, it is important to remember that these values do not exist in a vacuum; they are deeply rooted in the origins, history, government, and structure of a country. By comparing countries like Denmark and Nigeria, we see how deeply held beliefs regarding family, trust, and authority dictate the "rules" of social interaction. Understanding these differences is the first step toward moving beyond our own cultural ethnocentrism.

Reflection Questions:

1. Looking at the "Interpersonal Trust" scores, how might a communicator from Denmark (74%) need to adjust their expectations when entering a business negotiation in Brazil (7%)?
2. How does the high value placed on "Work Centrality" in China and Nigeria potentially impact the "invisible" communication style regarding work-life boundaries compared to the United States or Denmark?

As we move forward, we will explore **Hofstede's Dimensions of Cultural Variability**, a framework that helps us categorize these specific values into broader patterns to better predict and understand intercultural encounters.

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3.2: Dimensions of Cultural Variability

Core Value Dimensions in Intercultural Communication

Individualism vs. Collectivism

The salient category often used to characterize and contrast cultures is individualism versus collectivism. Individualism vs. collectivism anchor opposite ends of a continuum that describes how people define themselves and their relationships with others (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995). **Individualism** is just what it sounds like. It refers to people's tendency to take care of themselves and their immediate circle of family and friends, perhaps at the expense of the overall society. Cultures labeled as individualistic are seen as emphasizing the rights of the individual to self-determination, with children being brought up to be assertive and distinctive (Gudykunst & Kim, 2007). In individualistic cultures, what counts most is the self, or concern for one's own personal goals. Each person is viewed as responsible for their own success or failure in life. Initiating alone, sweating alone, achieving alone— not necessarily collective efforts—are what win applause. In individualistic cultures, competition is the fuel of success (Hofstede et al, 2010). The United States is labeled as the most individualistic country. People from the United States strongly believe in independence. They consider themselves as separate individuals in control of their own lives. The Declaration of Independence states that all people—not groups, but individual people—are created equal. In the United States, individualism is valued and promoted—from its political structure (individual rights and democracy) to entrepreneurial zeal (capitalism) (Triandis, 1995). Other examples of high-individualism cultures include Northern European societies and Australia (Hofstede, 2001).

In contrast, **collectivism** describes a society in which tightly-integrated relationships tie extended families and others into in-groups. These in-groups are laced with undoubted loyalty and support each other. When a person or culture has a collective orientation they place the needs and interests of the group above individual desires or motivations (Triandis, 1995). Collectivistic cultures (seen as prevalent in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East) emphasize group identity and conformity, with children expected to be obedient and respectful (Hofstede et al., 2010)

When looking at Hofstede's research and that of others on individualism and collectivism, it is important to remember that no culture is purely one or the other. Again, think of these qualities as points along a continuum rather than fixed positions (Gudykunst & Kim, 2017). Individuals and co-cultures may exhibit differences in individualism/collectivism from the dominant culture and certain contexts may highlight one or the other. Also remember that it can be very difficult to change one's orientation and interaction with those with different value orientations can prove challenging (Hofstede, 2001). In some of your classes, for example, does the Professor require a group project as part of the final grade? How do students respond to such an assignment? In our experience we find that some students enjoy and benefit from the collective and collaborative process and seem to learn better in such an environment. These students have more of a collectivistic orientation. Other students, usually the majority, are resistant to such assignments citing reasons such as "it's difficult to coordinate schedules with four other people" or "I don't want my grade resting on someone else's performance." These statements reflect an individualistic orientation.

Cultural Close-Up: Cuadrilla in Spain - Friendships as Collectivism

In Spain, particularly in the Basque Country, the concept of the *cuadrilla* illustrates how culture shapes social life. A *cuadrilla* is more than just a group of friends - it is a lifelong peer group formed in childhood or adolescence and sustained well into adulthood. Members of a *cuadrilla* spend free time together, celebrate milestones, and support one another through life's challenges. Belonging to a *cuadrilla* is considered a right and a responsibility: one gains the security of collective identity but also owes loyalty and participation to the group (Martinez de Albeniz, 2011).

The *cuadrilla* is a clear example of collectivism in action. Hofstede's framework shows that collectivistic cultures place the group above the individual, and the *cuadrilla* does exactly that. Belonging means loyalty, obligation, and shared identity - members stick together for life, making decisions with the group in mind. While many cultures see friendships come and go, the *cuadrilla* reflects a deeply rooted value: who you are is inseparable from the group you belong to (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Martines de Albeniz, 2011).

At a time when friendships in many cultures are fluid and easily reshaped, the Spanish *cuadrilla* stands out as a powerful reminder of the cultural value of collective bonds.

Discussion Questions

1. How might lifelong membership in a *cuadrilla* shape an individual's sense of self compared to someone raised in a highly individualistic society?
2. In what ways might the obligations of a *cuadrilla* both enrich and limit personal freedom?
3. How could the concept of *cuadrilla* influence workplace dynamics or teamwork when people from Spain interact with those from more individualistic cultures like the United States?

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Power Distance

Power distance refers to how openly a society or culture accepts or does not accept differences between people, as in hierarchies in the workplace, in politics, and so on. For example, **large power distance** cultures openly accept that a boss is "higher" and as such deserves more formal respect and authority. People tend to accept relationships of servitude. Subordinates expect to be told what to do and won't take initiative or speak their minds unless a manager explicitly asks for their opinion. They would probably be much less likely to challenge a decision, to provide an alternative, or to give input. They may have learned that less powerful people must accept decisions without comment, even if they have a concern or know there is a significant problem. An individual's status, age, and seniority are an integral part of the social equation. Examples of these cultures include Southern Europe, Latin America, and much of Asia. For example, in Japan or Mexico, the senior person is almost a father figure and is automatically given respect and usually loyalty without question (Hofstede et al., 2010).

At the other end of the spectrum are **small power distance** cultures, in which superiors and subordinates are more likely to see each other as equal in power. This sense of equality leads to the idea that all people are of the same standing or importance, and therefore, informality or lack of rigid social protocol is common. This leads to an informality of speech, dress, and manners that other cultures might find difficult to negotiate because of their own beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors. In Sweden, Norway, and Israel, for example, respect for equality is a warranty of freedom. Subordinates and managers alike often have carte blanche to speak their minds. Other countries found at this end of the spectrum include Austria and Denmark (Hofstede et al., 2010)

To be sure, not all cultures view power in the same ways. Research indicates that the United States tilts toward small power distance but is more in the middle of the scale than Germany and the United Kingdom. The United States has a culture of promoting participation at the office while maintaining control in the hands of the manager. People in this type of culture tend to be relatively laid-back about status and social standing—but there's a firm understanding of who has the power. What's surprising for many people is that countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia actually rank lower on the power distance spectrum than the United States (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

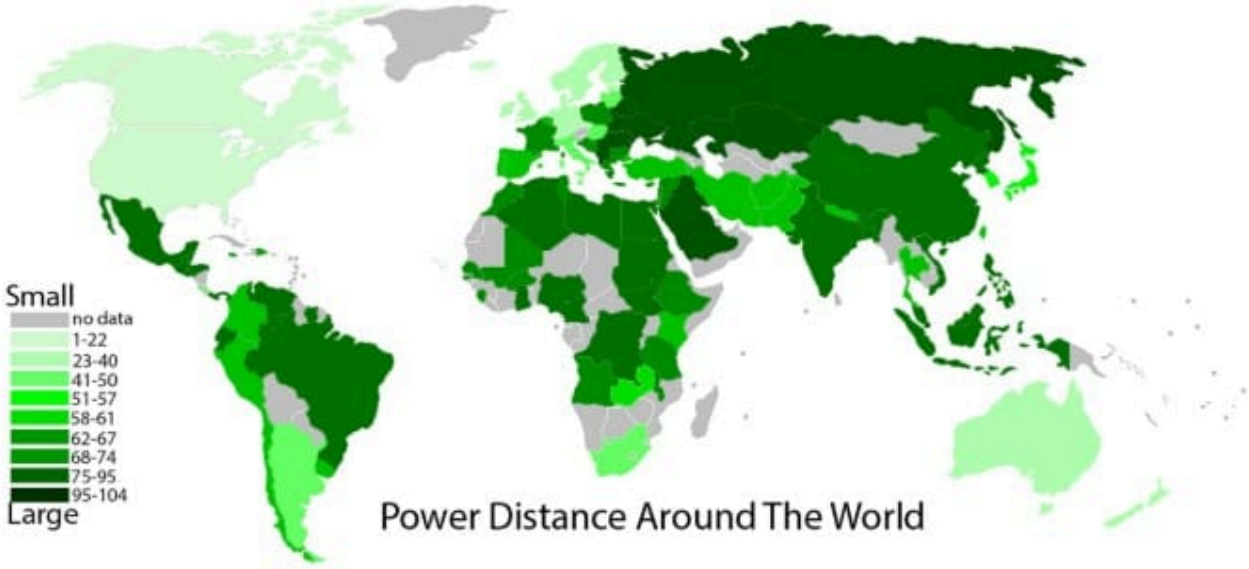


Figure 3.1.2: A map which shows the relative power distance of nations around the world

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance index measures a society's tolerance for uncertainty and change - whether people tend to accept new, unfamiliar situations or prefer stability and clear rules. People who have **strong uncertainty avoidance** generally prefer to steer clear of conflict and competition. They tend to appreciate very clear instructions. They dislike ambiguity. At the office, sharply defined rules and rituals are used to get tasks completed. Stability and what is known are preferred to instability and the unknown. Cultures in the Arab world, for example, have strong uncertainty avoidance; they tend to be resistant to change and reluctant to take risks. Whereas a U.S. business negotiator might enthusiastically agree to try a new procedure, the Egyptian counterpart would likely refuse to get involved until all the details are worked out (Hofstede et al., 2010).

Weak uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as the U.S. and Britain, show more acceptance of differing thoughts or ideas and are highly tolerant of uncertainty. Such cultures tend to impose fewer regulations, ambiguity is more accustomed to, and the environment is more free-flowing. In educational settings, people from countries with strong uncertainty avoidance expect their teachers to be experts with all of the answers. People from weak uncertainty avoidance countries don't mind it when a teacher says, "I don't know" (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

Masculinity vs. Feminity

This index is about how a society views traits that are considered masculine or feminine. Each carries with it a set of cultural expectations and norms for gender behavior and gender roles across life. Traditionally perceived "masculine" values are assertiveness, materialism, and less concern for others. In **masculine-oriented cultures**, gender roles are usually crisply defined. Men tend to be the breadwinners and women take care of domestic duties. Men tend to be more focused on performance, ambition, and material success. They cut tough and independent personas, while women cultivate modesty and quality of life. Cultures in Japan and Latin America are examples of masculine-oriented cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010).

In contrast, feminine cultures are thought to emphasize "feminine" values: concern for all, an emphasis on the quality of life, and an emphasis on relationships. In **feminine-oriented cultures**, gender roles are more fluid. In such societies it is not uncommon to see women as political and business leaders. There are fewer obstacles for women who enter the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, and less stigma for men who are stay-at-home dads or who enter the helping professions; those occupations typically considered more feminine. Feminine cultures typically offer generous paid maternity *and* paternity leave, free healthcare and free access to higher education. The Scandinavian cultures rank as feminine cultures, as do cultures in Switzerland and New Zealand. The United States is actually more moderate, and its score is ranked in the middle between masculine and feminine classifications (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation

This fifth dimension refers to whether a culture has a long-term or short-term orientation. This dimension was added by Hofstede after the original four you just read about. It resulted in the effort to understand the difference in thinking between the East and the West. Certain values are associated with each orientation. **The long-term orientation** values persistence, perseverance, and thriftiness. These are evident in traditional Eastern cultures. Long-term orientation is often marked by an order to relationships based on age and status. A sense of shame, both personal and for the family and community, is also observed across generations. What an individual does reflects on the family, and is carried by immediate and extended family members (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The short-term orientation values tradition only to the extent of fulfilling social obligations or providing gifts or favors. While there may be a respect for tradition, there is also an emphasis on personal representation and honor, a reflection of identity and integrity. Personal stability and consistency are also valued in a short-term oriented culture, contributing to an overall sense of predictability and familiarity. These cultures are more likely to be focused on the immediate or short-term impact of an issue. Not surprisingly, the United Kingdom and the United States rank as short-term orientations (Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

Indulgence vs. Restraint

This dimension refers to the degree of freedom that societal norms give to citizens in fulfilling their human desires. Countries with a **high indulgence** rating allow relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun. These cultures tend to place a higher importance on leisure and tend to act and spend money as they please. Countries with a **low indulgence** rating have strict social norms. Citizens are more likely to feel powerless, as if their experiences are not determined by their own actions, but rather situations happen to them. There is often a more visible police force, and maintaining national order is a high priority. Countries in Eastern Europe, including Russia, and some Asian countries have low indulgence ratings, indicating a restrained culture. Often, in these countries, there is a pervading idea that indulgence is somewhat wrong. While much of Western Europe falls in the median, most Anglo-Western nations such as The United States have a high indulgence rating (Hofstede et al., 2010; Hofstede Insights, n.d.).

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3.3: Five Fundamental Value Orientations

Value Orientation Theory

While Hofstede's dimensions offer a powerful framework for comparing national cultures through broad value patterns, they represent just one lens through which cultural differences can be understood. To deepen our perspective, let's take a look at Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Value Orientation Theory - a model that explores how cultures respond to universal human questions about time, activity, and relationships. This approach shifts focus from national traits to shared existential concerns, offering another valuable tool for analyzing intercultural communication.

The Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Value Orientations theory represents one of the earliest efforts to develop a cross-cultural theory of values. According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), every culture faces the same basic survival needs and must answer the same universal questions. It is out of this need that cultural values arise. The basic questions faced by people everywhere fall into five categories and reflect concerns about: 1) human nature, 2) the relationship between human beings and the natural world, 3) time, 4) human activity, and 5) social relations. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck hypothesized three possible responses or orientations to each of the concerns. Below is a table that summarizes the three responses for each concern:

Cultural Question	Value Orientation	Description	Examples
What is the inherent nature of human beings?	Evil	People are naturally bad; society must control impulses.	Traditional Puritan views, some authoritarian systems
	Good	People are basically good and trustworthy.	Some Indigenous worldviews, humanistic traditions
	Mixed (Good & Evil)	People can be shaped toward good or evil depending on circumstances	Many modern Western societies
What is the relationship between humans and nature?	Nature over humans	People are powerless against nature.	Traditional agrarian societies
	Harmony with nature	Humans should live in balance with nature.	Many Indigenous cultures, Eastern philosophies (e.g. Taoism)
	Humans over nature	People can and should control nature through science and technology.	U.S., Western industrial societies
What is the best way to think about time?	Past	Emphasis on history and tradition.	China, Middle Eastern societies
	Present	Focus on living fully in the moment.	Latin America, many Mediterranean societies
	Future	Focus on planning and working for a better tomorrow.	U.S., Northern Europe
What is the proper mode of human activity?	Being	Value placed on simply existing and relationships.	Many Indigenous societies
	Becoming	Life is a process of growth and self-actualization.	Some Eastern and New Age perspectives
	Doing	Worth measured by achievements and productivity.	U.S., Western Europe

Table 3.1.1: Summary of Kluckhohn-Strodbeck Values Orientation Theory

What is the inherent nature of human beings?

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), this is a question that all societies ask, and there are generally three different responses. The people in some societies are inclined to believe that people are inherently evil and that the society must exercise strong measures to keep the evil impulses of people in check. On the other hand, other societies are more likely to see human beings as basically good and possessing an inherent tendency towards goodness. Between these two poles are societies that see human beings as possessing the potential to be either good or evil depending upon the influences that surround them. Societies also differ on whether human nature is immutable (*unchangeable*) or mutable (*changeable*).

What is the relationship between human beings and the natural world?

Some societies believe nature is a powerful force in the face of which human beings are essentially helpless. We could describe this as "nature over humans." Other societies are more likely to believe that through intelligence and the application of technology, humans can control nature. In other words, they embrace a "humans over nature" position. Between these two extremes are the societies who believe humans are wise to strive to live in "harmony with nature" (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

What is the best way to think about time?

Some societies are rooted in the past, believing that people should learn from history and strive to preserve the traditions of the past. Other societies place more value on the here and now, believing people should live fully in the present. Then there are societies that place the greatest value on the future, believing people should always delay immediate satisfactions while they plan and work hard to make a better future (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

What is the proper mode of human activity?

In some societies, "being" is the most valued orientation. Striving for great things is not necessary or important. In other societies, "becoming" is what is most valued. Life is regarded as a process of continual unfolding. Our purpose on earth, the people might say, is to become fully human. Finally, there are societies that are primarily oriented to "doing." In such societies, people are likely to think of the inactive life as a wasted life. People are more likely to express the view that we are here to work hard and that human worth is measured by the sum of accomplishments (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

As Hill (2002) has observed, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck did not consider the theory to be complete. In fact, they originally proposed a sixth value orientation—Space: here, there, or far away, which they could not quite figure out how to investigate at the time. Today, the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck framework is just one among many attempts to study universal human values.

Critique of Cultural Values Analysis

While cultural distinctions can be helpful in describing general traditions and behavioral tendencies, they become problematic when rigidly applied to individuals. Today, personal identity is more fluid and multifaceted than ever before, shaped by a wide range of influences including ethnicity, social networks, migration, media exposure, and global experiences. For example, a second-generation Nigerian-American living in New York may draw equally from Yoruba cultural traditions, American mainstream media, and digital communities that span continents. This complexity challenges simplistic cultural classifications.



Figure 3.1.2: Representatives of the Yi Minority in China

Today, political borders no longer clearly define who people are. For example, Ukrainians living in other countries, Palestinians, and Uyghurs often feel a strong cultural connection that goes beyond the country they live in—and sometimes even conflicts with official government views. More and more, people are forming identities that stretch across countries. Immigration, remote work, and social media apps like TikTok and Instagram make it easy to connect with different cultures and new ideas every day..

Contemporary scholars in intercultural communication, like Holliday (2010), caution against using cultural categories too rigidly. They argue that these categories can lead to stereotypes - making it seem like a person's behavior is completely shaped by their culture, with no room for individuality. This way of thinking is called **essentialism**, which means assuming that people have fixed traits based on where they're from.

For example, if someone is from Mexico - a country often described as having high power distance - an essentialist view might assume that person will always follow authority and never question a boss. But that's not always true. People can adapt, change, and behave differently depending on the situation.

A related idea is **reductionism**, which means oversimplifying people by reducing their identity to a few cultural traits. This can lead to assumptions based on ethnicity or nationality, ignoring the fact that individuals have unique personalities and experiences. Just because a culture is labeled "feminine-oriented" doesn't mean everyone in it avoids ambition or success. Likewise, people in cultures labeled as "risk-avidant" may still take bold risks. For instance, Japan scores high in uncertainty avoidance, suggesting a preference for structure and predictability. Yet, Japanese youth embrace startup culture, launching tech ventures and fashion brands that challenge traditional norms. Notably, Uniqlo's global expansion involved bold market strategies and innovation - hardly risk-adverse behavior.

In reality, every culture includes a mix of values. You probably know people who act more individualistic and others who are more collectivist, even within the same community.

Holliday and other scholars (Holliday, 1999; Piller, 2017) also point out that many cultural categories were developed from a Western point of view. This can lead to biased judgements - for example, seeing individualism as positive and power distance as negative. These labels often reflect Western values, not universal truths.

Instead of relying on stereotypes, Holliday encourages us to take a **de-centered perspective** - to let cultures define themselves and to focus on individuals, not just cultural labels. Thai means being aware of our own assumptions and trying to "bracket" them - setting them aside - so we can understand others as complex individuals shaped by many influences.

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3.4: A Dialectical Approach to Intercultural Communication

Intercultural Communication: A Dialectical Approach

Intercultural communication is complicated, messy, and at times contradictory. Therefore it is not always easy to conceptualize or study. Taking a dialectical approach allows us to capture the dynamism of intercultural communication. A **dialectic** is a relationship between two opposing concepts that constantly push and pull one another (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). To put it another way, thinking dialectically helps us realize that our experiences often occur in between two different phenomena. This perspective is especially useful for intercultural communication, because when we think dialectically, we think relationally. This means we look at the relationship between aspects of intercultural communication rather than viewing them in isolation. Intercultural communication occurs as a dynamic in-betweenness that, while connected to the individuals in an encounter, goes beyond the individuals, creating something unique. Holding a dialectical perspective may be challenging for some Westerners, as it asks us to hold two contradictory ideas simultaneously, which goes against much of what we are taught in our formal education. Thinking dialectically helps us see the complexity in culture and identity because it doesn't allow for dichotomies. Dichotomies are dualistic ways of thinking that highlight opposites, reducing the ability to see gradations that exist in between concepts. Dichotomies such as good/evil, wrong/right, objective/subjective, male/female, in-group/out-group, black/white, and so on form the basis of much of our thoughts on ethics, culture, and general philosophy, but this isn't the only way of thinking (Marin & Nakayama, 1999). Many Eastern cultures acknowledge that the world isn't dualistic. Rather, they accept as part of their reality that things that seem opposite are actually interdependent and complement each other. I argue that a dialectical approach is useful in studying intercultural communication because it gets us out of our comfortable and familiar ways of thinking. Since so much of understanding culture and identity is understanding ourselves, having an unfamiliar lens through which to view culture can offer us insights that our familiar lenses will not. Specifically, we can better understand intercultural communication by examining six dialectics (see Figure below "Dialectics of Intercultural Communication") (Martin & Nakayama, 1999).



Figure 3.2: Dialectics of Intercultural Communication. Source: Adapted from Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama, "Thinking Dialectically about Culture and Communication," Communication Theory 9, no. 1 (1999): 1-25.

The **cultural-individual** dialectic captures the interplay between patterned behaviors learned from a cultural group and individual behaviors that may be variations on or counter to those of the larger culture (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). This dialectic is useful because it helps us account for exceptions to cultural norms. For example, earlier we learned that the United States is said to be an individualistic culture, where the rights and needs of the individual are prioritized (Hofstede et al., 2010). Conversely, Guatemala is said to be a collectivistic culture, which values group needs over individual ones. However, you can find people in the United States who intentionally put the needs of the group over their individual needs, perhaps because they have great care and concern for harmonious relations with others. Does that mean we come from a collectivistic culture? Does the Guatemalan man who pursues his own dreams and goals at the expense of group goals come from an individualistic culture? The answer to both questions is no.

Individual choices or behaviors, especially when they are situational or represent a small percentage of the population, do not define a cultural pattern. Recognizing the cultural-individual dialectic allows us to appreciate the complexity of identity and avoid oversimplifying people based on national or cultural labels.

The **personal-contextual** dialectic highlights the connection between our personal patterns of and preferences for communicating and how various contexts influence the personal. In some cases, our communication patterns and preferences will stay the same across many contexts. In other cases, a context shift may lead us to alter our communication and adapt. For example, an American businesswoman may prefer to communicate with her employees in an informal and laid-back manner. When she is promoted to manage a department in her company's office in Malaysia, she may again prefer to communicate with her new Malaysian employees the same way she did with those in the United States. In the United States, we know that there are some accepted norms that communication in work contexts is more formal than in personal contexts. However, we also know that individual managers often adapt these expectations to suit their own personal tastes. This type of managerial discretion would likely not go over as well in Malaysia where there is a greater emphasis put on large power distance (Hofstede, 1991). So while the American manager may not know how to adapt to the new context unless she has a high degree of intercultural communication competence, Malaysian managers would realize that this is an instance where the context likely influences communication more than personal preferences.

The **differences-similarities** dialectic allows us to examine how we are simultaneously similar to and different from others (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). As was noted earlier, it's easy to fall into a view of intercultural communication as "other oriented" and set up dichotomies between "us" and "them." When we overfocus on differences, we can end up polarizing groups that actually have things in common. When we overfocus on similarities, we essentialize, or reduce/overlook important variations within a group. This tendency is evident in most of the popular, and some of the academic, conversations regarding "gender differences." The book *Men Are from Mars and Women Are from Venus* (Gray, 1992) famously portrays men and women as if they come from entirely different planets.The media is quick to include a blurb from a research study indicating again how men and women are "wired" to communicate differently. However, the overwhelming majority of current research on gender and communication finds that while there are differences between how men and women communicate, there are far more similarities (Allen, 2011). Even the language we use - like "opposite sex" - reinforces unnecessary and limiting dichotomies. That's why I encourage students to use the term *other gender* instead. The word *opposite* suggests that men and women are fundamentally incompatible, when in reality, people of all genders share far more similarities than differences. Perhaps a better title than *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* would be *Women and Men Are Both from Earth* - a reminder that gender differences are nuanced, not absolute, and that communication is shaped by many factors beyond biology.

The **static-dynamic** dialectic suggests that culture and communication change over time yet often appear to be and are experienced as stable. Although it is true that our cultural beliefs and practices are rooted in the past, cultural categories that most of us assume to be stable, like race and gender, have changed dramatically in just the past fifty years. Some cultural values remain relatively consistent over time, which allows us to make some generalizations about a culture. For example, cultures have different orientations to time. The Chinese have a longer-term orientation to time than do Europeans (Lustig & Koester, 2006). This is evidenced in something that dates back as far as astrology. The Chinese zodiac is done annually (The Year of the Monkey, etc.), while European astrology was organized by month (Taurus, etc.). While this cultural orientation to time has been around for generations, as China becomes more Westernized in terms of technology, business, and commerce, it could also adopt some views on time that are more short term.

The **history/past-present/future** dialectic reminds us to understand that while current cultural conditions matter - and our actions now will shape the future - they're also rooted in the past (Martin & Nakayama, 2022). We don't view history in isolation; we interpret it through the lens of our current values and experiences. A powerful example of this is the legacy of slavery in the United States. When topics like reparations or racial equity come up, some people respond with, "I've never owned slaves. Why should I have to care about this now?" While that statement may be factual, it overlooks how the effects of slavery continue to shape society today. Black Americans continue to face disparities in wealth, education, and opportunity - inequities rooted in historical injustices like slavery and Jim Crow laws (Althoff & Reichardt, 2023). A Pew Research Center survey found that most Americans, especially Black adults, believe slavery still affects Black communities today. These effects are embedded in social systems and don't disappear easily. In summary, this dialectic reminds us that cultural issues aren't just about the present - they're shaped by the past and influence the future (Martin & Nakayama, 2022)

The **privileges-disadvantages** dialectic helps us understand how unearned advantages and systemic barriers operate across our different identities. In society, dominant and nondominant groups exist, and our cultural backgrounds, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socioeconomic status all shape the privileges or disadvantages we experience. To understand this dialectic, we must view culture and identity through a lens of **intersectionality,** which asks us to acknowledge that we each have multiple cultures and identities that intersect with each other, and no one is entirely privileged or entirely disadvantaged (Crenshaw, 1991). Because our identities are complex, no one is completely privileged and no one is completely disadvantaged.

For example, a white, heterosexual male may benefit from racial and gender privilege, but if he comes from a low income background or lives with a disability, he may face significant challenges that others don't. On the other hand, a Latina college student may experience racial and gender-based disadvantages, but if she's able-bodied and comes from a financially stable family, she may have access to resources that others lack. These overlapping identities shape how we move through the world. Students often struggle with this concept because they point to high-profile individuals - like Beyonce or Elon Musk - as proof that identity doesn't limit success. But these are exceptions, not the rule. While someone like Beyonce has achieved immense success, her experience doesn't erase the systemic barriers that many Black women continue to face in education, employment, and healthcare (Pew Research Center, 2023). Thus, understanding privilege and disadvantage at the **cultural level** means looking beyond individual stories and recognizing the broader systems that shape opportunity. It's not about guilt or blame - it's about awareness. When we acknowledge these dynamics, we're better equipped to engage in meaningful conversations about equity and inclusion.

As these dialectics reiterate, culture and communication are complex systems that intersect with and diverge from many contexts. A dialectical approach to studying intercultural communication is useful because it allows us to think about culture and identity in complex ways, avoiding dichotomies and acknowledging the tensions that must be negotiated. A better understanding of all these dialectics helps us be more critical thinkers and competent communicators in a changing world.

What Else Determines a Culture?

The study of cultural values and dialectics presented in this chapter provide a framework for a comparative analysis between cultures and the relational tensions that occur within them. Additionally, there are other external factors that also constitute a culture—identities, language, manners, media, relationships, and conflict, to name a few. Coming chapters will help us to understand how more cultural traits are incorporated into daily life.

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3.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Values

When Mei-Ling, a first-generation Taiwanese American student, began dating Antônia, who grew up in Brazil, she quickly discovered how differently they approached family expectations, religious traditions, and ideas about gender equality. What felt natural and unquestioned in her upbringing sometimes clashed with Antônia's more expressive and tradition-infused worldview. Their early conversations were full of curiosity but tense, full of moments where each wondered how to honor their own values without dismissing the other's. As Mei-Ling reflected on these moments, she realized that navigating their cultural differences would require intentional, compassionate communication rather than assumptions or avoidance.

Understanding cultural values is not about memorizing lists of traits—an impossible task—but about cultivating curiosity, empathy, and adaptability in real conversations. Here are some practical communication strategies to help you engage thoughtfully across cultures:

Stay curious.

Assume there's always more to learn. Ask yourself: *What values might be shaping this person's perspective?* Curiosity keeps you open rather than defensive, which makes intercultural conversations more meaningful.

Ask questions.

Invite stories, not just definitions. For example: "What does respect look like in your family or culture?" When people share experiences instead of labels, you gain a richer understanding of their worldview.

Be mindful of cultural differences.

Avoid assumptions based on your own norms. What feels "natural" to you may feel unfamiliar—or even uncomfortable—to someone else. Recognizing this helps you respond with sensitivity instead of judgment.

Listen for values beneath behaviors.

Instead of judging a behavior, ask what value it might express—such as harmony, independence, or tradition. This shift helps you interpret actions through a cultural lens rather than a personal one.

Reflect on your own cultural lens.

Consider what values you carry into interactions. How do they shape your expectations? Self-awareness makes it easier to understand why certain behaviors feel "right" or "wrong" to you.

Use language that invites dialogue.

Phrases like "I'm curious about..." or "Can you help me understand..." open space for connection. These invitations signal respect and encourage others to share openly.

Practice humility and empathy.

You won't always get it right—and that's okay. Openness to correction is part of intercultural growth, and responding with grace builds trust.

Recognize power dynamics.

Be aware of how privilege, status, or institutional norms may affect whose values are centered or respected. Understanding these dynamics helps you communicate more equitably and advocate for inclusion.

Broadening your understanding of intercultural values—and developing communication tools to talk about them—can strengthen your relationships in classrooms, communities, workplaces, and personal life.

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3.6: Conclusion

This chapter has explored how cultural values shape the way we communicate, interpret meaning, and navigate relationships. From Hofstede's dimensions to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's value orientations, we've seen that cultures offer distinct—but not rigid—answers to fundamental human questions. We've also examined how identity is shaped by overlapping influences, and how a dialectical approach helps us move beyond stereotypes to embrace complexity.

Ultimately, intercultural communication is not about mastering a checklist—it's about developing the insight and flexibility to engage across difference. Whether you're navigating power distance, decoding collectivist norms, or reflecting on your own cultural assumptions, the goal is not perfection but connection. By staying curious, asking thoughtful questions, and honoring the values of others, we become more effective communicators—and more compassionate humans

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4: IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

4.1: Foundations of Culture and Identity
4.2: Identity Development
4.3: Exploring Specific Cultural Identities
4.4: Identity and Migration
4.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Identity
4.6: Conclusion

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4.1: Foundations of Culture and Identity

Spotlight on Culture and Identity

When Jordan was in middle school, classmates often asked, “What are you?” - a question that made him pause every time. His mother was Chinese American, his father African American, and Jordan had grown up celebrating Chinese New Year with one side of the family and Juneteenth with the other. He loved both traditions, but he often felt like he had to “code-switch” depending on who he was with - speaking differently, dressing differently, even downplaying parts of himself to fit in.

One day during a school heritage project, Jordan was told to “pick one culture” to present. He hesitated. Choosing one felt like erasing the other. So instead, he created a presentation titled *Both/And*, sharing stories from both sides of his family and explaining how his identity wasn’t split - it was layered. His classmates were intrigued. His teacher was moved. And for the first time, Jordan felt seen as a whole person.

Jordan’s story reflects a growing reality for many students: identity is not fixed or singular - it’s dynamic, intersectional, and shaped by culture, context, and communication. This culture explores how intercultural communication helps us understand identity - not just as something we inherit, but as something we express, negotiate, and evolve through interaction. Whether you identify with one culture or many, this chapter will help you reflect on who you are, how you communicate, and how identity is shaped in a diverse and interconnected world.

Ask yourself the question “Who am I?” Recall from our earlier discussion of Self-concept is the idea that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become (Tatum, B. D., 2000). Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities.

Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are formed through processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore our identities aren’t something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009). **Personal identities** include the components of self that are primarily intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, I consider myself a puzzle lover, and you may identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our **social identities** are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.



Figure 4.1.1: Pledging a fraternity or sorority is an example of a social identity (Adaenn - CC BY-NC 2.0)

For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and listen to hip-hop music). There are numerous options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

Personal	Social	Cultural
Antique Collector	Member of Historical Society	Irish American
Dog Lover	Member of Humane Society	Male/Female
Cyclist	Fraternity/Sorority Member	Greek American
Singer	High School Music Teacher	Multiracial
Shy	Book Club Member	Heterosexual
Athletic		Gay/Lesbian

Table 4.1.1: Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. A current interest in online video games may give way to an interest in graphic design. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched. **Cultural identities** are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep, G. A., 2002). Because we are typically immersed in them from birth, cultural identities tend to be the most stable and least subject to change among the three. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots (Collier, M. J., 1996). For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement. Additionally, common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. We may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. **Ascribed identities** are personal, social, or cultural identities that are

placed on us by others, while **avowed identities** are those that we claim for ourselves (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and labels him or her a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, there has been a movement in recent years to reclaim the label *nerd* and turn it into a positive, and a nerd subculture has been growing in popularity. For example, rapper Megan Thee Stallion has openly embraced her love of anime, even cosplaying characters like Todoroki from *My Hero Academia* at public events. Her avowal of nerd identity - once stigmatized - has helped redefine what it means to be a herd, showing that niche interests can coexist with mainstream success. This example shows how ascribed and avowed identities can evolve and sometimes converge over time.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor's identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. If someone is biracial or multiracial, they may change their racial identification as they engage in an identity search. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an "Asianlatinoamerican" (Yep, 2002). He notes repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the United States. This example shows how even national identity fluctuates. Obviously one can change nationality by becoming a citizen of another country, although most people do not.

Throughout history, society has created **dominant** and **nondominant** groups based on culture, race, gender, ability and other social factors (Allen, 2011). Dominant groups - such as white people, men, able-bodied individuals, or heterosexuals in many Western societies - have typically had more access to resources, power and influence. Nondominant groups - such as people of color, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, or people with disabilities - have often had fewer opportunities and faced more barriers.

It's important to understand that these labels apply to social systems, not individual people. For example, a wealthy Black woman may have more money and education than a white man from a low-income background. But overall, the system still gives more advantages to white people and men as groups. These patterns are built into institutions like schools, workplaces, and government policies, and they don't disappear just because there are exceptions.

Because of this uneven playing field, people in dominant groups often receive unearned benefits - called *privilege* - while those in nondominant groups may face discrimination. This can show up in everyday life: a job applicant with a "white-sounding" name might get more callbacks than someone with a name perceived as ethnic; a man might be taken more seriously in a meeting than a woman saying the same thing; or a building might lack ramps, making it inaccessible to someone in a wheelchair. Privilege and disadvantage are not all-or-nothing. No one is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged. And no two people are exactly alike or entirely different. Our identities are complex, and understanding how they interact helps us see the bigger picture of social inequality.

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4.2: Identity Development

By now, you probably have some awareness of the cultural groups you belong to - maybe you identify as Black, Asian American, Latino, white, multiracial, or any other background. You might also think of yourself in terms of gender, class, religion, or ability. For example, someone might say, "I'm a middle-class, college-educated, queer Latina woman." These identities shape how we see ourselves and how others see us.

Think back: when did you first realize your racial or ethnic identity mattered? Was it during childhood, when someone made a comment about your skin color? Was it as a teenager when you noticed who was represented in the media - or who wasn't represented? Or maybe it's happening now, as you read this chapter. Most people's understanding of their identity changes over time, especially as they encounter new experiences, challenges, or communities (Cross & Cross, 2008; Phinney, 1990).

To help explain how this growth happens, scholars have created models that outline stages of racial identity development - similar to how Piaget described stages of childhood learning. These models aren't perfect or one-size-fits-all, but they offer a useful way to think about how people move from confusion or denial to pride and acceptance (Jernigan, Green, & Helms, 2017). Think of a model like a toy car: it's not the real thing, but it gives you a basic idea of how a car works. In the same way, identity models give us a general picture of how people often experience racial awareness. But real life is more complicated. For example, someone who is biracial might feel pulled between two cultures, while someone who is white might not think much about race until they're confronted with issues of privilege or inequality (Kwan, 2001).

In the next section, we will look at four identity development models:

- **Nondominant identity development (e.g., people of color navigating racism)**
- **Dominant identity development (e.g., white individuals becoming aware of privilege)**
- **Bi- or multiracial identity development (e.g., people with mixed heritage exploring belonging)**

Keep in mind, each person has multiple identities - such as race, gender, class, religion, ability, and sexual orientation - that overlap and shape how they experience the world. This concept is known as **intersectionality**, a term introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to explain how different aspects of identity combine to create unique experiences of privilege and discrimination. For instance, someone who is an immigrant and part of the LGBTQ+ community may face challenges related to both cultural background and sexual orientation, while another person might benefit from social advantages tied to race, gender, or economic status. These overlapping identities influence how individuals understand themselves and how they are treated by society. No single model can fully explain everyone's experiences, but recognizing intersectionality helps us appreciate the complexity of identity and the ways social systems shape our lives.

Nondominant Identity Development

There are four stages of nondominant identity development (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). The first stage is **unexamined identity**, which is characterized by a lack of awareness of or lack of interest in one's identity. For example, a young woman who will later identify as a lesbian may not yet realize that a nondominant sexual orientation is part of her identity. Similarly, a Latino teenager might not think much about his/her cultural heritage until they are asked to participate in a school event for Hispanic Heritage Month. They may wonder why it matters to feel disconnected from the traditions being celebrated. When someone begins to distance themselves from their own cultural identity and instead adopts the norms of a dominant group, they may enter the next stage, known as **conformity.**

In the **conformity** stage, an individual internalizes or adopts the values and norms of the dominant group, often in an effort not to be perceived as different. Individuals may attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture by changing their appearance, their mannerisms, the way they talk, or even their name. Moises, a Chicano man interviewed in a research project about identities, narrated how he changed his "Mexican sounding" name to Moses, which was easier for his middle-school classmates and teachers to say (Jones Jr., 2009). He also identified as white instead of Mexican American or Chicano because he saw how his teachers treated the other kids with "brown skin." Additionally, some gay or lesbian people in this stage of identity development may try to "act straight." In either case, some people move to the next stage, resistance and separation, when they realize that despite their efforts they are still perceived as different by and not included in the dominant group.

In the **resistance and separation** stage, an individual with a nondominant identity may shift away from the conformity of the previous stage to engage in actions that challenge the dominant identity group. Individuals in this stage may also actively try to separate themselves from the dominant group, interacting only with those who share their nondominant identity. For example, there has been a Deaf culture movement in the United States for decades. This movement includes people who are hearing impaired and believe that their use of a specific language, American Sign Language (ASL), and other cultural practices constitutes a unique culture, which they symbolize by capitalizing the *D* in *Deaf* (Allen, 2011).

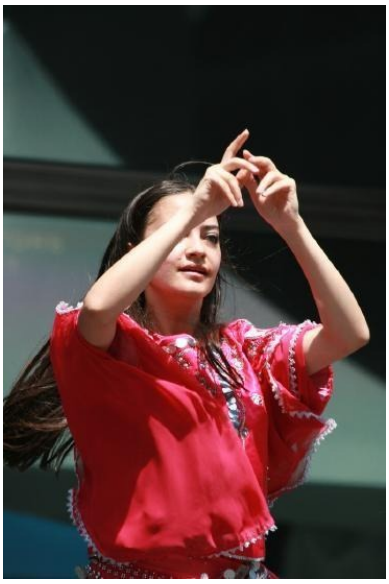


Figure 4.1.2: Many hearing-impaired people in the United States use American Sign Language (ASL), which is recognized as an official language (Quinn Dombrowski – ASL interpreter – CC BY-SA 2.0.).

While this is not a separatist movement, a person who is hearing impaired may find refuge in such a group after experiencing discrimination from hearing people. Staying in this stage may mean they haven't yet thought critically about the values they've adopted.

The **integration** stage marks a period where individuals with a nondominant identity have achieved a balance between embracing their own identities and valuing other dominant and nondominant identities. Although there may still be residual anger from the discrimination and prejudice they have faced, they may direct this energy into positive outlets such as working to end discrimination for their own or other groups. Moises, the Chicano man mentioned earlier, now works to support the Chicano community in his city and also has actively supported gay rights and women's rights.

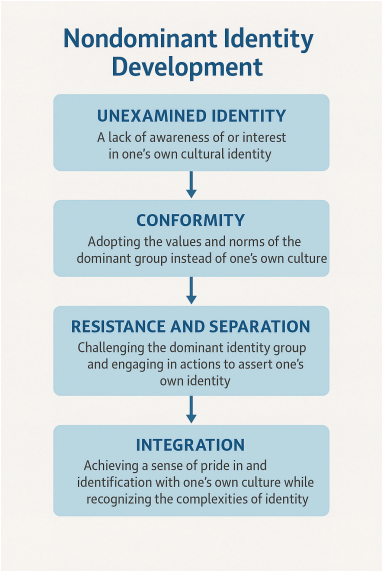


Diagram 4.1.1: Nondominant Identity Development adapted from Martin & Nakayama (2010).

Dominant Identity Development

Dominant identity development consists of five stages (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). The **unexamined** stage of dominant identity formation is similar to nondominant in that individuals in this stage do not think about their or others' identities. Although they may be aware of differences—for example, between races and genders—they either don't realize there is a hierarchy that treats some people differently than others or they don't think the hierarchy applies to them. For example, a white person may take notice that a person of color was elected to a prominent office. However, he or she may not see the underlying reason that it is noticeable —namely, that the overwhelming majority of our country's leaders are white. People with nondominant identities often become aware of their cultural positioning early on because they face discrimination or bias. In contrast, those with dominant identities may remain unaware of their social advantages and stay in the unexamined stage much longer.

In the **acceptance** stage, a person with a dominant identity passively or actively accepts that some people are treated differently than others but doesn't do anything internally or externally to address it. In the passive acceptance stage, we must be cautious not to blame individuals with dominant identities for internalizing racist, sexist, or heterosexist "norms." The socializing institutions we discussed earlier (family, peers, media, religion, and education) often make oppression seem normal and natural. For example, people who struggle to see that they are in this stage say things like "I know that racism exists, but my parents taught me to be a good person and see everyone as equal." While this is admirable, seeing everyone as equal doesn't make it so. And people who insist that we are all equal may claim that minorities are exaggerating their circumstances or "whining" and just need to "work harder" or "get over it." The person making these statements acknowledges difference but doesn't see their privilege or the institutional perpetuation of various "-isms." Although I've encountered many more people in the passive state of acceptance than the active state, some may progress to an active state where they acknowledge inequality and are proud to be in the "superior" group. In either case, many people never progress from this stage. If they do, it's usually because of repeated encounters with individuals or situations that challenge their acceptance of the status quo, such as befriending someone from a nondominant group or taking a course related to culture.

The **resistance** stage of dominant identity formation is a major change from the previous in that an individual acknowledges the unearned advantages they are given and feels guilt or shame about it. Having taught about various types of privilege for years, I've encountered many students who want to return their privilege or disown it. These individuals may begin to disassociate with their own dominant group because they feel like a curtain has been opened and their awareness of the inequality makes it difficult for them to interact with others in their dominant group. But it's important to acknowledge that becoming aware of your white privilege, for instance, doesn't mean that every person of color is going to want to accept you as an ally, so retreating to them may not be the most productive move. While moving to this step is a marked improvement in regards to becoming a more aware and socially just person, getting stuck in the resistance stage isn't productive, because people are often retreating rather than trying to address injustice. For some, deciding to share what they've learned with others who share their dominant identity moves them to the next stage.

People in the **redefinition** stage revise negative views of their identity held in the previous stage and begin to acknowledge their privilege and try to use the power they are granted to work for social justice. They realize that they can claim their dominant identity as heterosexual, able-bodied, male, white, and so on, and perform their identity in ways that counter norms. A male participant in a research project on identity said the following about redefining his male identity:

I don't want to assert my maleness the same way that maleness is asserted all around us all the time. I don't want to contribute to sexism. So I have to be conscious of that. There's that guilt. But then, I try to utilize my maleness in positive ways, like when I'm talking to other men about male privilege (Jones, Jr., 2009).

The final stage of dominant identity formation is **integration**. This stage is reached when redefinition is complete and people can integrate their dominant identity into all aspects of their life, finding opportunities to educate others about privilege while also being a responsive ally to people in nondominant identities. As an example, some heterosexual people who find out a friend or family member is gay or lesbian may have to confront their dominant heterosexual identity for the first time, which may lead them through these various stages. As a sign of integration, some may join an organization like PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), where they can be around others who share their dominant identity as heterosexuals but also empathize with their loved ones.



Figure 4.1.3: Heterosexual people with gay family members or friends may join the group PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) as a part of the redefinition and/or integration stage of their dominant identity development.. (Jason Riedy – Atlanta Pride Festival parade – CC BY 2.0.).

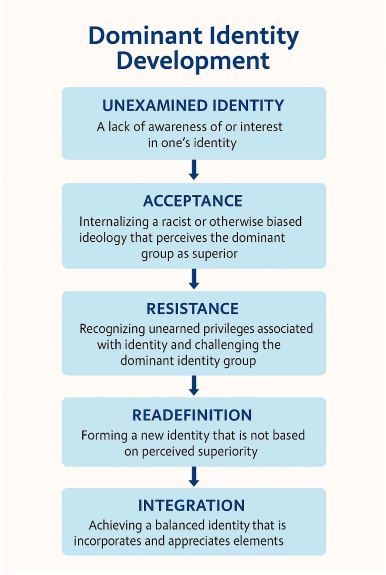


Diagram 4.1.2: Dominant Identity Development adapted from Martin & Nakayama (2010).

Bi- or Multiracial Identity Development

Originally, people thought that bi-racial individuals followed the development model of minority individuals, but given that we now know that race and the meanings about race are socially constructed, it makes sense to realize that a person of mixed racial ancestry is likely to be viewed differently (from both the dominant culture and the individual's own culture) than a minority individual. Thus, they are likely to experience a social reality unique to their experience. The following five-stage model is derived from the work of W.S. Carlos Poston.

Knowing more about various types of identities and some common experiences of how dominant and nondominant identities are formed prepares us to delve into more specifics about why difference matters.

- **Stage 1: Personal Identity**. Poston's first stage is much like the unexamined identity stage in the previous two models. Again, children are not aware of race as a value-based social category and derive their personal identity from individual personality features instead of cultural ones.

- **Stage 2: Group Categorization**. In the move from stage one to two, the person goes from no racial or cultural awareness to

having to choose between one or the other. In a family where the father is Black and the mother is Japanese, the child may be asked by members of both families to decide if he or she is Black or Japanese. Choosing both is not an option at this stage.

- **Stage 3: Enmeshment/Denial**. Following the choice made in stage two, individuals attempt to immerse themselves in one culture while denying ties to the other. This process may result in guilt or feelings of distance from the parent and family whose culture was rejected in stage two. If these feelings are resolved then the child moves to the next stage. If not, they remain here.
- **Stage 4: Appreciation**. When feelings of guilt and anger are resolved the person can work to appreciate all of the cultures that shape their identity. While there is an attempt to learn about the diversity of their heritage, they will still identify primarily with the culture chosen in stage two.
- **Stage 5: Integration**. In the fifth and final stage the once fragmented parts of the person's identity are brought together to create a unique whole. There is integration of cultures throughout all facets of the person's life—dress, food, holidays, spirituality, language, and communication.

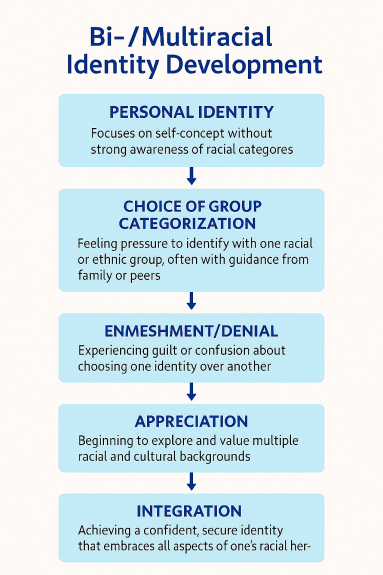


Diagram 4.1.3: Bi- or Multiracial Identity Development adapted from Martin & Nakayama (2010).

Martin and Nakayama's three identity development models provide foundational frameworks for exploring how individuals make sense of their cultural/ethnic identities. Each model shows distinct pathways shaped by social positioning, lived experience, and the tension between personal and societal expectations. Together, they emphasize that identity development is not linear or uniform, but a dynamic process of reflection, adaptation, and growth. By examining these models, students of intercultural communication gain deeper insight into how identity influences perception, interaction, and power dynamics across cultural contexts. This understanding is crucial for developing empathy, reducing bias, and communicating effectively in diverse settings.

Difference Matters

Whenever we encounter someone, we notice similarities and differences. While both are important, it is often the differences that are highlighted and that contribute to communication troubles. We don't only see similarities and differences on an individual level. In fact, we also place people into in-groups and out-groups based on the similarities and differences we perceive. This is important because we then tend to react to someone we perceive as a member of an out-group based on the characteristics we attach to the group rather than the individual (Allen, 2011). In these situations, it is more likely that stereotypes and prejudice will influence our communication. Learning about differences and why it matters will help us be more competent communicators. The flip side of emphasizing difference is to claim that no differences exist and that you see everyone as a human being. Rather than trying to ignore differences and see each person as a unique individual, we should know the history of how differences came to be so socially and culturally significant and how they continue to affect us today.

Culture and identity are complex. You may be wondering how some groups came to be dominant and others nondominant. These differences are not natural, which can be seen as we unpack how various identities have changed over time in the next section. There is, however, an ideology of domination that makes it seem natural and normal to many that some people or groups will always have power over others (Allen, 2011). In fact, hierarchy and domination, although prevalent throughout modern human history, were likely not the norm among early humans. So one of the first reasons difference matters is that people and groups are treated unequally, and better understanding how those differences came to be can help us create a more just society. Difference also matters because demographics and patterns of interaction are changing.

In the United States, the population of people of color is increasing and diversifying, and visibility for people who are gay or lesbian and people with disabilities has also increased. According to the 2020 Census, the Latinx population in the United States reached 62.5 million, making up approximately 19% of the total population and solidifying its position as the second-largest racial or ethnic group in the country (Pew Research Center, 2023). The growth of the Latinx population grew by 23% between 2010 and 2020, leading all other racial and ethnic groups in growth (Vela-Williamson, 2021). Additionally, legal and social changes have created a more open environment for sexual minorities and people with disabilities. These changes directly affect our interpersonal relationships. The workplace is one context where changing demographics has become increasingly important. Many organizations are striving to comply with changing laws by implementing policies aimed at creating equal access and opportunity. Some organizations are going further than legal compliance to try to create inclusive climates where diversity is valued because of the interpersonal and economic benefits it has the potential to produce. Looking ahead, demographic projections suggest that by 2030, racial and ethnic minorities will make up 40% of the U.S. population, reflecting the country's increasing diversity and the importance of culturally responsive communication.

"Getting Real": Diversity Training

Businesses in the United States spend billions annually on diversity training, yet its effectiveness remains widely debated. Research shows that diversity training is more successful when it aligns with an organization's mission and is designed to foster genuine inclusion - not just legal compliance (Devine & Ash, 2022). Mandatory training focused solely on avoiding lawsuits or checking boxes can backfire, reinforcing resistance rather than promoting change.

A meaningful commitment to diversity requires a multipronged approach. Many organizations now appoint a dedicated staff member to even a "chief diversity officer" to lead these efforts. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management continues to recommend best practices for diversity training:

- Align learning objectives with organizational goals
- Use evidence-based methods and materials
- Communicate expectation clearly in advance
- Create a supportive, noncoercive learning environment
- Hire qualified instructors
- Monitor and revise training based on feedback and outcomes (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2011)

When these principles are followed, diversity training has a greater chance of fostering inclusive workplace cultures that value
difference - not just tolerate it.

1. Have you ever participated in any diversity training? If so, what did you learn or take away from the training? Which of the guidelines listed did your training do well or poorly on?
2. Do you think diversity training should be mandatory or voluntary? Why?
3. From what you've learned so far in this book, what communication skills are important for a diversity trainer to have?

Devine, P.G., & Ash, T.L. (2022). Diversity training goals, limitations, and promise: A review of the multidisciplinary literature.
Annual Review of Psychology, 73, 403-429. view source

U.S. Office of Personnel Management. (2011). *Guidelines for diversity training.* view source

We can now see that difference matters due to the inequalities that exist among cultural groups and due to changing demographics that affect our personal and social relationships. For example, the increasing visibility of transgender individuals, the growing Latinx population, and the rise in disability advocacy all reflect a more diverse and vocal society (Pew Research Center, 2023). Unfortunately, there are many obstacles that may impede our valuing of difference (Allen, 2011). Individuals with dominant identities may not validate the experiences of those in nondominant groups because they do not experience the oppression directed at those with nondominant identities. The lack of awareness is often rooted in unacknowledged privilege, which can make it difficult to recognize how systems of power operate. Consequently, members of dominant groups may minimize, dismiss, or question the lived realities of nondominant individuals, labeling them as “too sensitive” or “complainers” (Andoh, 2024). Recall from our earlier discussion of identity formation that people with dominant identities may stay in the unexamined or acceptance stages for a long time. Being stuck in these stages makes it much more difficult to value differences.

Members of nondominant groups may have difficulty valuing differences due to negative experiences with the dominant group, such as not having their experiences validated. Both groups may be restrained from communicating about differences due to norms of political correctness, which may make people feel afraid to speak up because they may be perceived as insensitive or racist. All these obstacles are common and they are valid. However, as we will learn later, developing intercultural communication competence can help us gain new perspectives, become more mindful of our communication, and intervene in some of these negative cycles.

Contributors and Attributions

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4.3: Exploring Specific Cultural Identities

We can get a better understanding of current cultural identities by unpacking how they came to be. By looking at history, we can see how cultural identities that seem to have existed forever actually came to be constructed for various political and social reasons and how they have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this construction. As we have already discussed, our identities are relational and communicative; they are also constructed. Social constructionism is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). In this section, we'll explore how the cultural identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States and how communication relates to those identities. There are other important identities that could be discussed, like religion, age, nationality, and class. Although they are not given their own section, consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of "historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances" (Allen, 2011). Therefore, we'll define **race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others.**



Figure 4.2.1: There is actually no biological basis for racial classification among humans, as we share 99.9 percent of our DNA. (Evelyn - friends - CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Race didn't become a socially and culturally recognized marker until European colonial expansion in the 1500s. As Western Europeans traveled to parts of the world previously unknown to them and encountered people who were different from them, a hierarchy of races began to develop that placed lighter skinned Europeans above darker skinned people. At the time, newly developing fields in natural and biological sciences took interest in examining the new locales, including the plant and animal life, natural resources, and native populations. Over the next three hundred years, science that we would now undoubtedly recognize as flawed, biased, and racist legitimized notions that native populations were less evolved than white Europeans, often calling them savages. In fact, there were scientific debates as to whether some of the native populations should be considered human or animal. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Western "scientists" used these differences as "proof" that native populations were less evolved than the Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can't deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people as if it were "real."

Given that race is one of the first things we notice about someone, it's important to know how race and communication relate (Allen, 2011). Discussing race in the United States is difficult for many reasons. One is due to uncertainty about language use. People may be frustrated by their perception that labels change too often or be afraid of using an "improper" term and being viewed as racially insensitive. It is important, however, that we not let political correctness get in the way of meaningful dialog and learning opportunities related to difference. Learning some of the communicative history of race can make us more competent communicators and open us up to more learning experiences.

Racial classifications used by the government and our regular communication about race in the United States have changed frequently, which further points to the social construction of race. Currently, the primary racial groups in the United States are African American, Asian American, European American, Latinx, and Native American, but a brief look at changes in how the US Census Bureau has defined race clearly shows that this hasn't always been the case (see Table 8.2 "Racial Classifications in the US Census"). In the 1900s alone, there were twenty-six different ways that race was categorized on census forms (Allen, 2011). The way we communicate about race in our regular interactions has also changed, and many people are still hesitant to discuss race for fear of using "the wrong" vocabulary.

Year(s)	Development
1790	No category for race
1800s	Race was defined by the percentage of African "blood." *Mulatto* was one black and one white parent, *quadroon* was one-quarter African blood, and *octoroon* was one-eighth.
1830–1940	The term *color* was used instead of *race*.
1900	Racial categories included white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Census takers were required to check one of these boxes based on visual cues. Individuals did not get to select a racial classification on their own until 1970.
1950	The term *color* was dropped and replaced by *race*.
1960, 1970	Both *race* and *color* were used on census forms.
1980–2010	*Race* again became the only term.
2000	Individuals were allowed to choose more than one racial category for the first time in census history.
2010	The census included fifteen racial categories and an option to write in races not listed on the form.

Table 4.2.1: Racial Classifications in the US Census
Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 71-72.

The five primary racial groups noted previously can still be broken down further to specify a particular region, country, or nation. For example, Asian Americans are diverse in terms of country and language of origin and cultural practices. While the category of Asian Americans can be useful when discussing broad trends, it can also generalize among groups, which can lead to stereotypes. You may find that someone identifies as Chinese American or Korean American instead of Asian American. In this case, the label further highlights a person's cultural lineage. We should not assume, however, that someone identifies with his or her cultural lineage, as many people have more in common with their US American peers than a culture that may be one or more generations removed.

History and personal preference also influence how we communicate about race. Culture and communication scholar Brenda Allen notes that when she was born in 1950, her birth certificate included an *N* for Negro. Later she referred to herself as *colored* because that's what people in her community referred to themselves as. During and before this time, the term *black* had negative connotations and would likely have offended someone. There was a movement in the 1960s to reclaim the word *black,* and the slogan "black is beautiful" was commonly used. Brenda Allen acknowledges the newer label of *African American* but notes that she still prefers *black*. The terms *colored* and *Negro* are no longer considered appropriate because they were commonly used during a time when black people were blatantly discriminated against. Even though that history may seem far removed to some, it is not to others. Currently, the terms *African American* and *black* are frequently used, and both are considered acceptable. The phrase *people of color* is acceptable for most and is used to be inclusive of other racial minorities. If you are unsure what to use, you could always observe how a person refers to himself or herself, or you could ask for his or her preference. In any case, a competent communicator defers to and respects the preference of the individual.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to shared cultural traits - such as language, religion, values, and traditions - that connect people within a group. People may identify with or be labeled by ethnic groups in ways that don't always match racial categories. For example, ethnic groups like Irish, Italian, of Jewish are often considered racially "white," while the ethnic groups like "British" include people of many racial backgrounds, such as Black, Asian, and multiracial individuals. These examples show how race and ethnicity often overlap but aren't the same. Today, ethnicity is still used by individuals and institutions - for example, in the census, workplace policies, and everyday interactions - as a way to describe identity. Unlike race, ethnicity focuses on cultural connections rather than biological traits.

Latin Americans, Latinos, Latinas, Latinx, and Hispanics

The label *Latin American* generally refers to people who live in Central American countries. Although Spain colonized much of what is now South and Central America and parts of the Caribbean, the inhabitants of these areas are now much more diverse. Depending on the region or country, some people primarily trace their lineage to the indigenous people who lived in these areas before colonization, or to a Spanish and indigenous lineage, or to other combinations that may include European, African, and/or indigenous heritage. *Latina* and *Latino* are labels that are preferable to *Hispanic* for many who live in the United States and trace their lineage to South and/or Central America and/or parts of the Caribbean. In verbal communication you might say "Latina" when referring to a particular female or "Latino" when referring to a particular male of Latin American heritage. When referring to the group as a whole, you could say "Latinx" instead of just "Latinos," which would be more gender inclusive. While *Hispanic* is used by the US Census, it refers primarily to people of Spanish origin, which doesn't account for the diversity of background of many Latinx. The term *Hispanic* also highlights the colonizer's influence over the indigenous, which erases a history that is important to many. Additionally, there are people who claim Spanish origins and identify culturally as Hispanic but racially as white. Labels such as *Puerto Rican* or *Mexican American*, which further specify region or country of origin, may also be used. Just as with other cultural groups, if you are unsure of how to refer to someone, you can always ask for and honor someone's preference.

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Gender

When we first meet a newborn baby, we ask whether it's a boy or a girl. This question illustrates the importance of gender in organizing our social lives and our interpersonal relationships. A Canadian family became aware of the deep emotions people feel about gender and the great discomfort people feel when they can't determine gender when they announced to the world that they were not going to tell anyone the gender of their baby, aside from the baby's siblings. Their desire for their child, named Storm, to be able to experience early life without the boundaries and categories of gender brought criticism from many (Davis & James, 2011). Conversely, many parents consciously or unconsciously "code" their newborns in gendered ways based on our society's associations of pink clothing and accessories with girls and blue with boys. While it's obvious to most people that colors aren't gendered, they take on new meaning when we assign gendered characteristics of masculinity and femininity to them. Just like race, gender is a socially constructed category. While it is true that there are biological differences between who we label male and female, the meaning our society places on those differences is what actually matters in our day-to-day lives. And the

biological differences are interpreted differently around the world, which further shows that although we think gender is a natural, normal, stable way of classifying things, it is actually not. There is a long history of appreciation for people who cross gender lines in Native American and South Central Asian cultures, to name just two.

You may have noticed I use the word *gender* instead of *sex*. That's because **gender is an identity based on internalized cultural notions of masculinity and femininity that is constructed through communication and interaction.** There are two important parts of this definition to unpack. First, we internalize notions of gender based on socializing institutions, which helps us form our gender identity. Then we attempt to construct that gendered identity through our interactions with others, which is our gender expression. Sex is based on biological characteristics, including external genitalia, internal sex organs, chromosomes, and hormones (Wood, 2005). While the biological characteristics between men and women are obviously different, it's the meaning that we create and attach to those characteristics that makes them significant. The cultural differences in how that significance is ascribed are proof that "our way of doing things" is arbitrary. For example, cross-cultural research has found that boys and girls in most cultures show both aggressive and nurturing tendencies, but cultures vary in terms of how they encourage these characteristics between genders. In a group in Africa, young boys are responsible for taking care of babies and are encouraged to be nurturing (Wood, 2005).

Gender has been constructed over the past few centuries in political and deliberate ways that have tended to favor men in terms of power. And various academic fields joined in the quest to "prove" there are "natural" differences between men and women. While the "proof" they presented was credible to many at the time, it seems blatantly sexist and inaccurate today. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, scientists who measure skulls, also known as craniometrists, claimed that men were more intelligent than women because they had larger brains. Leaders in the fast-growing fields of sociology and psychology argued that women were less evolved than men and had more in common with "children and savages" than adult (white) males (Allen, 2011). Doctors and other decision makers like politicians also used women's menstrual cycles as evidence that they were irrational, or hysterical, and therefore couldn't be trusted to vote, pursue higher education, or be in a leadership position. These are just a few of the many instances of how knowledge was created by seemingly legitimate scientific disciplines that we can now clearly see served to empower men and disempower women. This system is based on the ideology of **patriarchy, which is a system of social structures and practices that maintains the values, priorities, and interests of men as a group (Wood, 2005).** Patriarchy often stays in place because it's hard to see - it's treated as "normal." While gender research has focused mostly on women, men have often been overlooked and seen as the default or "standard" human. This ignores the fact that men also have a gender. Studies in masculinity challenges this idea by exploring how men learn and express their gender in different ways.

There have been challenges to the construction of gender in recent decades. Since the 1960s, scholars and activists have challenged established notions of what it means to be a man or a woman. The women's rights movement in the United States dates back to the 1800s, when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848 (Wood, 2005). Although most women's rights movements have been led by white, middle-class women, there was overlap between those involved in the abolitionist movement to end slavery and the beginnings of the women's rights movement. Although some of the leaders of the early women's rights movement had class and education privilege, they were still taking a risk by organizing and protesting. Black women were even more at risk, and Sojourner Truth, an emancipated slave, faced those risks often and gave a much noted extemporaneous speech at a women's rights gathering in Akron, Ohio, in 1851, which came to be called "Ain't I a Woman?" (Wood, 2005) Her speech highlighted the multiple layers of oppression faced by black women.

Feminism as an intellectual and social movement advanced women's rights and our overall understanding of gender. Feminism has gotten a bad reputation based on how it has been portrayed in the media and by some politicians. In classroom discussions about gender, students are often asked whether they identify as feminist. Typically, only a few respond affirmatively - if any. This hesitation is frequently linked to the connotations and misconceptions surrounding the term "feminist." However, when the question is reframed to ask whether students believe women have been treated unfairly and whether greater equity is needed, the majority tend to agree. This contrast highlights how language and framing can influence perceptions, even when the underlying values are shared. Gender and communication scholar Julia Wood has found the same trend and explains that a desire to make a more equitable society for everyone is at the root of feminism. She shares comments from a student that capture this disconnect:

> "I would never call myself a feminist, because that word has so many negative connotations. I don't hate men or anything, and I'm not interested in protesting. I don't want to go around with hacked-off hair and no makeup and sit around bashing men. I do think women should have the same kinds of rights, including equal pay for equal work. But I wouldn't call myself a feminist." (Wood, 2005)

It's important to remember that there are many ways to be a feminist and to realize that some of the stereotypes about feminism

are rooted in sexism and homophobia, in that feminists are reduced to “men haters” and often presumed to be lesbians. The feminist movement also gave some momentum to the transgender rights movement. **Transgender is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression do not match the gender they were assigned by birth.** Transgender people may or may not seek medical intervention like surgery or hormone treatments to help match their physiology with their gender identity. The term *transgender* includes other labels such as *transsexual*, *transvestite*, *cross-dresser*, and *intersex*, among others. Terms like *hermaphrodite* and *she-male* are not considered appropriate. As with other groups, it is best to allow someone to self-identify first and then honor their preferred label. If you are unsure of which pronouns to use when addressing someone, you can use genderneutral language or you can use the pronoun that matches with how they are presenting. If someone has long hair, make-up, and a dress on, but you think their biological sex is male due to other cues, it would be polite to address them with female pronouns, since that is the gender identity they are expressing.

Gender as a cultural identity continues to shape many aspects of our lives, especially in education and the workplace. Schools remain central places of socialization, and the educational experiences of boys and girls differ in subtle but significant ways from early childhood through higher education. Research shows that teachers are still more likely to call on boys, offer them more feedback and encourage assertiveness and achievement, while girls are often guided toward emotional expression and appearance-related concerns (Nowak, 2021). These patterns reinforce gendered expectations and contribute to disparities in confidence, participation, and self-image. Additionally, although women make up nearly 77% of the U.S. teaching workforce, they hold disproportionately fewer leadership roles - only 28% of superintendents and 35% of high school principals are women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In higher education, women represent just 27% of full professors, despite earning the majority of graduate degrees (American Association of University Professors, 2022).

These educational inequalities mirror broader workplace trends. Although women now comprise nearly half of the U.S. labor force, they remain underrepresented in executive leadership and continue to face a persistent wage gap. As of 2023, women earn approximately 83 cents for every dollar earned by men, with even wider gaps for women of color (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). To raise awareness, Equal Pay Day is observed annually to mark how far into the year women must work to earn what men earned the previous year. In 2024, Equal Pay Day fell on March 12, underscoring the ongoing need for equality in both education and employment.

Sexuality

While race and gender are two of the first things we notice about others, sexuality is often something we view as personal and private. Although many people hold a view that a person’s sexuality should be kept private, this isn’t a reality for our society. One only needs to observe popular culture and media for a short time to see that sexuality permeates much of our public discourse.

Sexuality relates to culture and identity in important ways that extend beyond sexual orientation, just as race is more than the color of one’s skin and gender is more than one’s biological and physiological manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Sexuality isn’t just physical; it is social in that we communicate with others about sexuality (Allen, 2011). Sexuality is also biological in that it connects to physiological functions that carry significant social and political meaning like puberty, menstruation, and pregnancy. Sexuality connects to public health issues like sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and teen pregnancy. Sexuality is at the center of political issues like abortion, sex education, and gay and lesbian rights. While all these contribute to sexuality as a cultural identity, the focus in this section is on sexual orientation.

The most obvious way sexuality relates to identity is through sexual orientation. **Sexual orientation refers to a person’s primary physical and emotional sexual attraction and activity.** The terms we most often use to categorize sexual orientation are *heterosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual*. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are sometimes referred to as sexual minorities. While the term *sexual preference* has been used previously, *sexual orientation* is more appropriate, since *preference* implies a simple choice. Although someone’s preference for a restaurant or actor may change frequently, sexuality is not as simple. The term *homosexual* can be appropriate in some instances, but it carries with it a clinical and medicalized tone. As you will see in the timeline that follows, the medical community has a recent history of “treating homosexuality” with means that most would view as inhumane today. So many people prefer a term like *gay*, which was chosen and embraced by gay people, rather than *homosexual*, which was imposed by a then discriminatory medical system.

The gay and lesbian rights movement gained national visibility in the United States during the 1950s and continues today, as seen in ongoing debates around sexual orientation and gender identity in politics, media, and law. Organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign advocate for the rights of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities represented by the “+” in LGBTQ+ - including intersex, asexual, and nonbinary individuals (American Psychological Association, 2022). While these communities are often grouped under one umbrella acronym, they represent distinct experiences and challenges. Gay and lesbian individuals have historically received the most visibility and resources. In contrast, bisexual people remain underrepresented

in both media and advocacy efforts, often facing erasure or invalidation (GLADD, 2023). Transgender issues have gained more attention in recent years, though transgender identity is rooted more in gender than sexual orientation. The term “queer” is used by some as an inclusive label that challenges rigid categories of sexuality and gender. Once considered derogatory, “queer” was reclaimed by activists in the 1980s and 1990s and is now embraced by many as a symbol of resistance and fluidity (Faderman, 2016). These distinctions highlight the diversity within the LBGTQ+ communities, much like the variation found across racial and gender identities.

As with other cultural identities, notions of sexuality have been socially constructed in different ways throughout human history. Sexual orientation didn’t come into being as an identity category until the late 1800s. Before that, sexuality was viewed in more physical or spiritual senses that were largely separate from a person’s identity. Table 8.3 “Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication” traces some of the developments relevant to sexuality, identity, and communication that show how this cultural identity has been constructed over the past 3,000 years.

Develoopment Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication

Year(s)	Development
1400 BCE - 565 BCE	During the Greek and Roman era, there was no conception of sexual orientation as an identity. However, sexual relationships between men were accepted for some members of society. Also at this time, Greek poet Sappho wrote about love between women.
533	Byzantine Emperor Justinian makes adultery and same-sex sexual acts punishable by death.
1533	Civil law in England indicates the death penalty can be given for same-sex sexual acts between men.
1810	Napoleonic Code in France removes all penalties for any sexual activity between consenting adults.
1861	England removes death penalty for same-sex sexual acts.
1892	The term *heterosexuality* is coined to refer a form of "sexual perversion" in which people engage in sexual acts for reasons other than reproduction.
1897	Dr. Magnus Hirschfield founds the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in Berlin. It is the first gay rights organization.
1900-1930	Doctors "treat" homosexuality with castration, electro-shocked therapy, and incarceration in mental hospitals.
1934	The terms *heterosexuality* and *homosexuality* appear in Webster's dictionary with generally the same meaning the terms hold today.
1948	American sexologist Alfred Kinsey's research reveals that more people than thought have engaged in same-sex sexual activity. His research highlights the existence of bisexuality.
1969	On June 27, patrons at the Stonewall Inn in New York City fight back as police raid the bar (a common practice used by police at the same time to harass gay people). "The Stonewall Riot," as it came to be called, was led by gay, lesbian, and transgender patrons of the bar, many of whom were working class and/or people of color.
1974	The American Psychiatric Association removes its reference to homosexuality as a mental illness.
1999	The Vermont Supreme Court rules that the state must provide legal rights to same-sex couples. In 2000, Vermont becomes the first state to offer same-sex couples civil unions.
2003	The US Supreme Court rules that Texas's sodomy law is unconstitutional, which effectively decriminalizes consensual same-sex relations.
2011	The US military policy "Don't Ask Don't Tell" is repealed, allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly.

Table 4.2.2: Developments Related to Sexuality, Identity, and Communication
Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 117-25; and University of Denver Queer and Ally Commission, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer History," *Queer Ally Training Manual*, 2008.

Ability

There is resistance to classifying ability as a cultural identity, because we follow a medical model of disability that places disability as an individual and medical rather than social and cultural issue. While much of what distinguishes able-bodied and cognitively

able from disabled is rooted in science, biology, and physiology, there are important sociocultural dimensions. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines an individual with a **disability** as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment" (Allen, 2011). An impairment is defined as "any temporary or permanent loss or abnormality of a body structure or function, whether physiological or psychological" (Allen, 2011). This definition is important because it notes the social aspect of disability in that people's life activities are limited and the relational aspect of disability in that the perception of a disability by others can lead someone to be classified as such. Ascribing an identity of disabled to a person can be problematic. If there is a mental or physical impairment, it should be diagnosed by a credentialed expert. If there isn't an impairment, then the label of *disabled* can have negative impacts, as this label carries social and cultural significance. People are tracked into various educational programs based on their physical and cognitive abilities, and there are many cases of people being mistakenly labeled disabled who were treated differently despite their protest of the ascribed label. Students who did not speak English as a first language, for example, were—and perhaps still are—sometimes put into special education classes.

Ability, just as the other cultural identities discussed, has institutionalized privileges and disadvantages associated with it. **Ableism** is the system of beliefs and practices that produces a physical and mental standard that is projected as normal for a human being and labels deviations from it abnormal, resulting in unequal treatment and access to resources. Ability privilege refers to the unearned advantages that are provided for people who fit the cognitive and physical norms (Allen, 2011). Perhaps you broke your leg and had to use crutches or a wheelchair for a while. Getting sick for a prolonged period of time also lessens our abilities, but we may fully recover from any of these examples and regain our ability privilege. Whether you've experienced a short-term disability or not, the majority of us will become less physically and cognitively able as we get older.

Statistically, people with disabilities make up the largest minority group in the United States, with an estimated 20 percent of people five years or older living with some form of disability (Allen, 2011). Medical advances have allowed some people with disabilities to live longer and more active lives than before, which has led to an increase in the number of people with disabilities. This number could continue to increase, as we have thousands of veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with physical disabilities or psychological impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder.



Figure 4.2.2: As recently disabled veterans integrate back into civilian life, they will be offered assistance and accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Wounded Warrior Regiment - CC BY-NC 2.0

As disability has been constructed in US history, it has intersected with other cultural identities. For example, people opposed to "political and social equality for women cited their supposed physical, intellectual, and psychological flaws, deficits, and deviations from the male norm." They framed women as emotional, irrational, and unstable, which was used to put them into the "scientific" category of "feeblemindedness," which led them to be institutionalized (Carlson, 2001). Arguments supporting racial inequality and tighter immigration restrictions also drew on notions of disability, framing certain racial groups as prone to mental retardation, mental illness, or uncontrollable emotions and actions. See Table 8.4 "Developments Related to Ability, Identity, and Communication" for a timeline of developments related to ability, identity, and communication. These thoughts led to a dark time in US history, as the **eugenics** movement sought to limit reproduction of people deemed as deficient.

Year(s)	Development
400 BCE	The Greeks make connections between biology, physiology, and actions. For example, they make a connection between epilepsy and a disorder of the mind but still consider the source to be supernatural or divine.
30–480	People with disabilities are viewed with pity by early Christians and thought to be so conditioned because of an impurity that could possibly be addressed through prayer.
500–1500	As beliefs in the supernatural increase during the Middle Ages, people with disabilities are seen as manifestations of evil and are ridiculed and persecuted.
1650–1789	During the Enlightenment, the first large-scale movements toward the medical model are made, as science and medicine advance and society turns to a view of human rationality.
1900s	The eugenics movement in the United States begins. Laws are passed to sterilize the "socially inadequate," and during this time, more than sixty thousand people were forcibly sterilized in thirty-three states.
1930s	People with disabilities become the first targets of experimentation and mass execution by the Nazis.
1970s	The independent living movement becomes a prominent part of the disability rights movement.
1990	The Americans with Disabilities Act is passed through Congress and signed into law.

Table 4.2.3: Developments Related to Ability, Identity, and Communication
Source: Maggie Shreve, "The Movement for Independent Living: A Brief History," *Independent Living Research Utilization*, accessed October 14, 2011, ilru.org/html/publications/in...L_paradigm.doc.

During the early part of the 1900s, the eugenics movement was the epitome of the move to rehabilitate or reject people with disabilities (Allen, 2005). This was a brand of social engineering that was indicative of a strong public support in the rationality of science to cure society's problems (Allen, 2011). A sterilization law written in 1914 "proposed to authorize sterilization of the socially inadequate," which included the "feebleminded, insane, criminalistic, epileptic, inebriate, diseased, blind, deaf, deformed, and dependent" (Lombardo, 2011). During the eugenics movement in the United States, more than sixty thousand people in thirtythree states were involuntarily sterilized (Allen, 2011). Although the eugenics movement as it was envisioned and enacted then is unthinkable today, some who have studied the eugenics movement of the early 1900s have issued warnings that a newly packaged version of eugenics could be upon us. As human genome mapping and DNA manipulation become more accessible, advanced genetic testing could enable parents to eliminate undesirable aspects or enhance desirable characteristics of their children before they are born, creating "designer children" (Spice, 2005).

Much has changed for people with disabilities in the United States in the past fifty years. The independent living movement (ILM) was a part of the disability rights movement that took shape along with other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The ILM calls for more individual and collective action toward social change by people with disabilities. Some of the goals of the ILM include reframing disability as a social and political rather than just a medical issue, a shift toward changing society rather than just rehabilitating people with disabilities, a view of accommodations as civil rights rather than charity, and more involvement by people with disabilities in the formulation and execution of policies relating to them (Longmore, 2003). As society better adapts to people with disabilities, there will be more instances of interability communication taking place.

Interability communication is communication between people with differing ability levels; for example, a hearing person communicating with someone who is hearing impaired or a person who doesn't use a wheelchair communicating with someone who uses a wheelchair. Since many people are unsure of how to communicate respectfully and effectively with individuals with disabilities, disability advocacy organizations have developed guidelines to promote inclusive and considerate interactions. One widely shared resource is the "Ten Commandments of Etiquette for Communicating with People with Disabilities," which offers practical strategies to help you in communicating with persons with disabilities (*10 Commandments of Communication | Access and Disability Resources*, n.d.):

1. When talking with a person with a disability, speak directly to that person rather than through a companion or sign-language interpreter.
2. When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
3. When meeting a person who is visually impaired, always identify yourself and others who may be with you. When conversing in a group, remember to identify the person to whom you are speaking.
4. If you offer assistance, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
5. Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others. (Never patronize people who use wheelchairs by patting them on the head or shoulder.)

6. Leaning on or hanging on to a person's wheelchair is similar to leaning or hanging on to a person and is generally considered annoying. The chair is part of the personal body space of the person who uses it.
7. Listen attentively when you're talking with a person who has difficulty speaking. Be patient and wait for the person to finish, rather than correcting or speaking for the person. If necessary, ask short questions that require short answers, a nod, or a shake of the head. Never pretend to understand if you are having difficulty doing so. Instead, repeat what you have understood and allow the person to respond. The response will clue you in and guide your understanding.
8. When speaking with a person who uses a wheelchair or a person who uses crutches, place yourself at eye level in front of the person to facilitate the conversation.
9. To get the attention of a person who is deaf, tap the person on the shoulder or wave your hand. Look directly at the person and speak clearly, slowly, and expressively to determine if the person can read your lips. Not all people who are deaf can read lips. For those who do lip reading, be sensitive to their needs by placing yourself so that you face the light source and keep hands, cigarettes, and food away from your mouth when speaking.
10. Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use accepted, common expressions such as "See you later" or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability. Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do.

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4.4: Identity and Migration

When people move to a new country or culture, their personal identities - such as ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and cultural background - play a big role in how they adjust. This process is called *acculturation*, and it involves learning how to live and communicate in a new cultural environment while still holding on to parts of one's original identity. For example, someone who identifies as Latinx may find comfort in speaking Spanish at home while learning to use English at school or work. A person with a disability may face challenges if the new culture doesn't offer accessible transportation, buildings, or communication tools. These barriers can make it harder to adjust and feel included during the acculturation process. Acculturation experiences are different for everyone, and they're shaped by how society treats each identity group. In this section, we'll take a look at the acculturation process and we will take a closer look at refugees - people who are forced to migrate - and explore how their identities affect their acculturation journey in even more complex ways.

Cross-cultural adaptation

Those who have the day-to-day experience of living in the culture are likely to have quite a different experience from tourists. This might involve learning and using a second language, coping with bureaucracies, finding out how things get done in that culture, making new friends, and a host of other issues and potential difficulties that everyone living in that culture – native or foreigner – experiences. This process of adjustment is often referred to as **acculturation**, the learning and adapting of at least some of the values, norms, and behaviors of the new culture. This may be an easy process or long and difficult. That depends on many factors, including one's age, educational level, familiarity with the language and culture, reasons for relocating, support structures available (friends, family, coworkers), and the degree of difference between one's home culture and that of the new residence. Acculturation can be fragmented; that is, one might adapt to some parts of a culture and not others. Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) distinguish between psychological adjustment (emotional well-being) and sociocultural adaptation (the ability to function day-to-day in the target culture). While psychological adjustment is largely dependent on personality and social support, "sociocultural adaptation, measured in relation to the amount of difficulty experienced in the performance of daily tasks, is more dependent on variables such as length of residence in the new culture, language ability, cultural distance, and the quantity of contact with host nationals" (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999, p. 424). While both forms of adjustment are present during initial contact with the new culture, normally sociocultural problems steadily decrease over time. Psychological adjustments are more variable.

The process of acculturation - how individuals or groups adapt to a new cultural environment - can vary widely depending on the purpose and duration of intercultural contact. Whether the interaction is driven by colonization, trade, evangelism, or education, the outcomes are shaped by both external pressures and personal choices. Scholar John Berry (Berry & Sam, 1997) identified four main modes of acculturation: **assimilation** is where individuals shed their original cultural identity to fully adopt the host culture. **Integration** is where people maintain their heritage while forming positive relationships with the new culture. This is often seen as the most balanced and successful approach. Next, there is **separation**, where individuals retain their original identity and avoid deep engagement with the host culture. Finally, there's **marginalization**, where people feel disconnected from both their heritage and the new culture, often leading to confusion and alienation. Additional patterns of acculturation include **segregation**, when the dominant culture resists intercultural contact (e.g., apartheid in South Africa), and **seclusion**, when a non-dominant group chooses to remain apart to preserve its way of life (e.g., the Amish). Richard Mendoza (1989) also introduced **cultural transmutation**, where individuals identify primarily with a third cultural group - such as youth culture or LGBTQ+ communities - rather than with either their heritage or host culture. These varied responses to migration and cultural contact reflect the complex ways identity and environment interact during the acculturation process.

Student Voice

Immigrating was more than changing an address; it redefined my perspective of the world. My life in India was full of close connections, noisy and hot mornings in our small house, where neighbors felt like family. We trusted each other so much that we shared house keys and the tiniest secrets. Outside, the world was chaotic: streets packed with cars, scooters, and bikes, their endless honking filling the air.

However, coming here felt unreal. The clean, quiet streets, clear weather, and lined houses were surreal. While excited about this new chapter, the silence felt heavy, and I soon faced a huge hurdle: I couldn't communicate.

On my first day of school, I saw groups of laughing friends. I stared down, gripping my backpack as I walked the halls, fighting back tears. When I found my classroom, I sat down and tried to understand the faces around me. I felt so alone that I stayed in my seat through snack and lunch, just waiting for the day to end.

The loneliness sharpened when a friendly girl asked, "Hey, what's your name?" My heart pounded. I could only whisper, "Pushti." She smiled and said, "Cool!" but my tongue felt too heavy to say more. I turned away, my cheeks burning, consumed by embarrassment that made me feel worthless. I cried every day, convinced I didn't belong here. Even when other students invited me to join them, I just stood there awkwardly, not understanding a single word.

I knew I had to adapt and learn, so I mustered every bit of my courage to approach my teacher after class. My hands were sweaty, and my English words were jumbling. "Please," I said, "you speak... too fast. Can you... help me?" I expected her to ignore me, but her eyes softened. She nodded and said, "Of course. I'm so glad you asked." Her kind words lifted a weight from my shoulders.

Soon after, I joined an English Language Development program. We learned through games, which made English fun instead of frightening. It took time, but I slowly started talking with classmates and making friends, regaining my confidence and saving my mom from washing my rumal (handkerchief).

The confidence I built became my foundation. As my English improved, so did my courage. I went from fearing a single sentence to raising my hand in class. That success gave me the bravery for bigger challenges, leading me to honors and AP classes. Each essay I wrote, even with complaints, was a journey of improvement and growth, helping me express my voice and ideas more clearly.

My journey taught me that communication is the most important bridge between cultures. Back then, English was a wall that locked me out. Now, it is the tool I use to connect, learn, and share my story. A language barrier is one of the greatest hurdles to overcome, but remember, your voice matters, and with each small, brave step, you are building your own bridge and becoming a better version of yourself.

Pushti Patel, Community College Transfer Student

The history of immigration in the United States also ties to the way that race has been constructed. The metaphor of the melting pot has been used to describe the immigration history of the United States but doesn't capture the experiences of many immigrant groups (Allen, 2011). Generally, immigrant groups who were white, or light skinned, and spoke English were better able to assimilate, or melt into the melting pot. But immigrant groups that we might think of as white today were not always considered so. Irish immigrants were discriminated against and even portrayed as black in cartoons that appeared in newspapers. In some Southern states, Italian immigrants were forced to go to black schools, and it wasn't until 1952 that Asian immigrants were allowed to become citizens of the United States. All this history is important, because it continues to influence communication among races today.

🌍 Acculturation Modes Overview

Types of Acculturation

Mode	Definition	Cultural Identity Retained	Relationship with Host Culture	Example
Assimilation	Adopting host culture fully; original identity is lost	❌ No	✅ Yes	Changing language, dress, beliefs
Integration	Balancing both cultures; bicultural identity	✅ Yes	✅ Yes	Canada's multicultural model

Mode	Definition	Cultural Identity Retained	Relationship with Host Culture	Example
Separation	Keeping original identity; minimal contact with host culture	✅ Yes	❌ No	Ethnic enclaves, selective adaptation
Marginalization	Losing connection to both cultures; feeling alienated	❌ No	❌ No	Identity confusion, isolation
Segregation	Dominant culture blocks intercultural contact	✅ Yes (by force)	❌ No (by exclusion)	Apartheid in South Africa
Seclusion	Non-dominant group chooses isolation to preserve culture	✅ Yes	❌ No	Amish communities
Cultural Transmutation	Adopting a third identity outside host or heritage cultures	🔁 Mixed	🔁 Mixed	LGBTQ+ or youth subcultures

Table 4.3.1: Acculturation Modes Overview - Chart adapted from Copilot (2025), licensed under CC BY 4.0

There are many reasons why people migrate to new countries, but one of the most common is the search for stable employment to support themselves and their families. In 2025, millions of women continue to migrate from the global south - such as the Philippines, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria - to wealthier regions like North America, Europe and countries along the Persian Gulf to work as domestic and care workers. These women often leave behind their own children and communities to care for families of others, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the “global care chain” (Kapar, 2025).

The emotional toll of this migration is compounded by structural inequalities. Many migrant domestic workers face exploitative labor conditions, such as long hours, withheld wages, and limited freedom of movement - especially under systems like the Kafala sponsoring model in the Middle East. Social acceptance is also uneven. Domestic laborers are often treated differently than migrants who arrive as professionals or students, and class-based discrimination can intersect with race, religion, and immigration status. For example, in France, North African women working in private homes may face both gendered and racialized exclusion, while in the U.S., tensions sometimes arise between middle-class Mexican Americans and newly arrived undocumented migrants, whose presence may be seen as threatening to hard-won social standing (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 339).

Importantly, the visibility and number of migrants can influence public attitudes. When migration is perceived as large-scale or culturally disruptive, host societies may respond with restrictive laws or social backlash. Yet these responses often ignore the deeper economic and emotional realities driving migrations. As the international Labour Organization notes, gender gaps, informal employment, and working poverty remain persistent challenges in global labor markets, especially for women in low-wage sectors like domestic work (International Labour Organization, 2025).



Figure 4.3.1: Filipina nanny in Canada

Getting Critical: Immigration, Laws, and Religion

Immigration, Laws, and Religion

France, like the United States, maintains a constitutional separation between church and state. But in recent years, this principle has sparked intense debate as immigration - especially from Muslim-majority countries - continues to reshape European societies. As of 2025, France is considering a **total ban on hijabs in all sporting competitions**, following earlier laws that prohibited **niqabs in public spaces** and **headscarves in state schools** (Strzyzynska, 2025). These laws are framed as efforts to protect secularism and promote national unity, but critics argue they disproportionately target Muslim women and restrict religious freedom.

During the 2024 Paris Olympics, French athletes were banned from wearing hijabs, promoting backlash from human rights groups like Amnesty International, who called the policy discriminatory (Gull, 2025). The proposed 2025 bill would extend these restrictions to all sports, removing the ability of individual federations to make their own rules. Supporters claim the law helps preserve French values and keeps religion out of public life. Opponents say it stigmatizes Muslim communities and limits personal expression.

These legal debates reflect deeper tensions around **assimilation, identity,** and **belonging**. Should immigrants be expected to change how they dress or practice religion to fit in? What happens when laws meant to promote equality end up excluding certain groups?

“In France, hijab bans are low-hanging fruit,” says Mobashra Tazamal of Georgetown University’s Bridge Initiative. “They’re politically popular, but they come at the cost of human dignity.” (Strzyzynska, 2025)

1. Some people who support the law argue that part of integrating into Western society is showing your face. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Part of the argument for the law is to aid in the assimilation of Muslim immigrants into French society. What are some positives and negatives of this type of assimilation?
3. Identify which of the previously discussed dialectics can be seen in this case. How do these dialectics capture the tensions involved?

Old & New Immigrants: Still a Tense Mix in 2025

Tensions between long-established Latino communities and newly arrived immigrants continue to shape social dynamics across the United States. In regions like the Southeast and Midwest, Mexican and Central American migrants have filled labor-intensive jobs in industries such as meatpacking, agriculture, and manufacturing. While these jobs are essential to the economy, they’ve

also sparked friction. Many older Latino/a residents - who have worked hard to gain middle-class status and acceptance - feel caught in the middle. They may be criticized by White Americans for imperfect English, while also being judged by newcomers for speaking Spanish with a U.S. accent or for distancing themselves from traditional customs (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p 339).

This divide is not new. Historically, waves of immigrants have clashed over language, class, and cultural authenticity. But in 2025, these tensions are amplified by shifting immigration policies and economic pressures. According to the *National Latino Family Report 2025,* 57% of Latino Families worry that friends or relatives may face deportation, and many report avoiding public services out of fear. These anxieties can deepen mistrust between immigrant generations - especially when older, documented residents feel their own status is threatened by the arrival of undocumented workers.

As Sanchez and Pedroza (2025) note, “Latino families are navigating a climate of fear and fragmentation, where immigration status, class, and cultural identity intersect in painful ways.” Understanding these tensions requires a closer look at how identity, language and social belonging evolve across generations.

1. How do language, class, and cultural expectations shape the relationship between long-established Latino/a communities and newly arrived immigrants?
2. In what ways might older immigrant communities feel both solidarity and conflict with newer arrivals from their country of origin?
3. How can educators, community leaders, or policymakers help bridge the gap between “old” and “new” immigrants to promote mutual respect and inclusion?

Refugees: Forced Migration and the Acculturation Journey

While many migrants move to improve their economic situation, others are forced to flee their home countries due to war, persecution, or environmental disaster. In 2025, over 122 million people will have been forcibly displaced worldwide - a sharp increase driven by conflict, climate change, and political instability (International Centre for Migration Policy Development [ICMPD], 2025). These migrants include individuals escaping ethnic or religious discrimination, political repression, or extreme poverty. Some leave alone or in small groups, such as political activists or religious minorities; others as part of mass migrations, like the Rohingya Muslims fleeing Myanmar or displaced families from Ukraine, Syria, and Sudan (Rahmani, 2025).

Refugees often settle in neighboring countries due to proximity and cultural familiarity. For example, Rohingyas have sought refuge in Bangladesh and Thailand, while many Syrians have moved to Turkey and Lebanon. Staying close to home allows for potential repatriation and family reunification. However, temporary refugee camps frequently become semi-permanent settlements, with limited access to education, healthcare, and employment. Refugees are often barred from working, and children may lack formal schooling, which hinders both personal development and long-term integration (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

The **acculturation process** for refugees is especially complex. Unlike voluntary migrants who may choose how to engage with a new culture, refugees often face **marginalization** - limited resources, social exclusion, and legal restrictions that prevent full participation in society (Berry & Sam, 1997). Host communities may resent the use of public resources or feal cultural disruption, sometimes leading to discrimination or violence. In Europe, backlash against refugees from the Middle East and Africa between 2014 and 2016 fueled the rise of anti-immigrant political parties and policies that continue to shape migration debates today (Parkes, 2016).

Despite these challenges, innovative efforts are helping refugees navigate acculturation. Mobile phones have become lifelines, allowing migrants to share travel tips, locate safe routes, and access legal and cultural resources. Apps like **InfoAid, Gherbtna,** and **Crisis Info Hub** offer support for language learning, legal navigation, and day-to-day survival. Yet digital tools can only go so far. Successful acculturation depends on the reception refugees receive, the opportunities available, and the support systems in place to help them build meaningful lives (Parkes, 2016).

For those granted asylum or permanent residence, acculturation is not a one-time event but a long-term process. Refugees must learn to balance their cultural heritage with the norms of the host society - often while coping with trauma, loss, and uncertainty. Integration programs that offer language training, employment pathways, and community support are essential to fostering bicultural identities and reducing marginalization (Berry & Sam, 2016; ICMPD, 2025).

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4.5: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Identity

Communicating About Cultural Identity

As we've explored throughout this chapter, identity isn't something we're born with fully formed—it grows, shifts, and evolves as we move through life. Communication plays a major role in shaping how we understand ourselves and how others understand us. Our earliest ideas about identity often come from our families, but they continue to develop through our friendships, education, religious or community groups, and the media we consume, from TV and film to TikTok and Instagram.

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1. Take time to explore your own identities.

Look back at the personal, social, and cultural identities discussed in this chapter.
Ask yourself: *How do I describe myself in each of these areas? Which identities feel central to who I am right now?*

Example: You might identify as a first-generation college student, an athlete, a caregiver, or part of a particular cultural or linguistic community.

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2. Practice talking about the identities you embrace—and the ones you don't.

Identity work takes reflection. Try having open conversations with trusted friends, family members, or mentors about why certain identities feel authentic to you while others do not.
Example: You might embrace the label "Latinx" but not "Hispanic." Can you explain the difference and why it matters to you?

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3. Respect the identities and labels others choose for themselves.

Language evolves, and so do the words people use to describe who they are. Instead of questioning or dismissing someone's identity, approach with curiosity.
A simple question like **"What does that identity mean to you?"** can open the door to meaningful understanding.

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4. Learn about the cultural and historical identities within your own family.

Understanding your family's story—migration, traditions, struggles, celebrations—can deepen your sense of self and help you appreciate the diversity of others' experiences.

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5. Learn about the cultural and historical identities of the people you care about.

Ask friends or partners about the traditions, values, or histories that shape them. This builds empathy and strengthens relationships.

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6. Notice how media influences identity.

Pay attention to how TV shows, films, influencers, and online communities shape your ideas about yourself and others.
Ask: *Whose stories are being told? Whose are missing? How does this affect the way I see the world?*

7. Use language that invites connection, not assumptions.

Phrases like **“I’d love to hear more about that”** or **“Thanks for sharing that with me”** help create a space where people feel safe expressing who they are.

8. Stay open to growth.

Your understanding of identity—your own and others’—will continue to evolve. Being willing to learn, unlearn, and adjust is one of the most powerful communication tools you have.

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4.6: Conclusion

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the many ways culture and identity shape how we understand ourselves and interact with others. It began by exploring the foundations of identity, emphasizing that who we are is never fixed or singular. Instead, identity is dynamic—shaped by personal experiences, social expectations, and the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, and other cultural influences. The chapter highlighted the difference between **ascribed identities** (how others label us) and **avowed identities** (how we see ourselves), while also acknowledging how privilege and disadvantage influence identity development.

Building on this foundation, the chapter introduced models of **identity development** for both dominant and nondominant groups, showing how individuals navigate belonging, bias, and social power. These models underscore the importance of inclusive environments—especially in workplaces—where people feel safe to express their identities and engage in open dialogue.

The chapter then turned to specific cultural identities, explaining how categories such as **race, ethnicity, gender, and ability** are socially constructed rather than biologically fixed. It traced the historical roots of racial categories, clarified the distinction between race and ethnicity, and explored the complexities of identity labels, particularly within Latinx communities. Gender was discussed as a cultural system that shapes opportunities and representation across institutions.

Next, the chapter examined **identity and migration**, focusing on acculturation and the different ways individuals adapt to new cultural environments through assimilation, integration, separation, or marginalization. It also addressed the structural inequalities faced by migrant workers and highlighted how immigration policies—such as recent legislation in France—can stigmatize specific cultural or religious groups.

The chapter concluded with a **Toolkit for Communicating about Identity**, offering practical strategies for engaging across differences with curiosity, empathy, and respect. Together, these sections emphasize that identity is both deeply personal and profoundly social, shaped by history, culture, and power—and that understanding these dynamics is essential for meaningful intercultural communication.

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5: VERBAL PROCESSES AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

5.1: Language and Culture
5.2: Moving Between Languages
5.3: Variations in Communication Styles
5.4: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Verbal Exchanges
5.5: Conclusion

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5.1: Language and Culture

"It's a date!"

When I was in graduate school, many of my classmates were international students. Their command of the English language was very impressive, but when a language is not your first language, it can be easy to rely on literal meanings of words. One incident in particular highlighted this challenge. My Japanese classmate, Emi, visited her advisor's undergraduate class to present her thesis and ask the students to complete a survey. The presentation went smoothly, and his students filled-out her survey. As Emi was leaving, her advisor, Dr. Richardson said warmly, "We would love for you to come back and present your results when you're done." Emi agreed, saying, "Of course!" Just as she reached the door, Dr. Richardson added, "It's a date then!" Emi froze, turned around nervously, and responded, "Ok... but I will have to ask my boyfriend first."

Later, the rest of us laughed gently after explaining the misunderstanding to Emi. In English, "It's a date" can mean simply, "It's an arrangement" or "We'll plan on it," but Emi had understood it only in its romantic sense. While she was able to laugh about it later, in the moment she felt stressed, caught between respecting her advisor and honoring her relationship with her boyfriend.

This example shows how words carry not only literal meanings but also connotations that depend on cultural context. What may seem like an everyday expression to one speaker can feel confusing or even more alarming to another. As we move forward in this chapter, we will explore how meanings are shaped by culture, how misunderstandings arise, and how paying attention to both denotative and connotative meanings can help us become more mindful, effective, and sensitive communicators.

How do you communicate? How do you think? We use language as a system to create and exchange meaning with one another, and the types of words we use influence both our perceptions and others' interpretation of our meanings. Language is one of the more conspicuous expressions of culture. As such, the role of language is central to our understanding of intercultural communication.

The Study of Language

Linguistics is the study of language and its structure. Linguistics deals with the study of particular languages and the search for general properties common to all languages. It also includes explorations into language variations (i.e. dialects), how languages change over time, how language is stored and processed in the brain, and how children learn language. The study of linguistics is an important part of intercultural communication. Areas of research for linguists include **phonetics** (the study of the production, acoustics, and hearing speech sounds), **phonology** (the patterning of sounds), **morphology** (the patterning of words), **syntax** (the structure of sentences), **semantics** (meaning), and **pragmatics** (language in context). When you study linguistics, you gain insight into one of the most fundamental parts of being human—the ability to communicate. You can understand how language works, how it is used, plus how it is developed and changes over time. Since language is universal to all human interactions, the knowledge attained through linguistics is fundamental to understanding cultures.

World Languages

Languages differ in a number of ways. Not all languages, for example, have a written form. Those that do use a variety of writing systems. Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet, while Hindi uses Devanagari. Chinese has a particularly ancient and rich written language, with many thousands of pictographic characters. Because of the complexity and variety of Chinese characters, there is a simplified equivalent called Pinyin, which enables Chinese characters to be referenced using the Latin alphabet. This is of particular usefulness in electronic communication. The arrival of touch-enabled smartphones has been of great benefit to languages with alternative writing systems such as Chinese or Arabic (Godwin-Jones, 2017d). Smartphones and word processors can now support writing systems that write right to left such as Hebrew.

Sample text in Korean (Hangeul)

모든 인간은 태어날 때부터 자유로우며 그 존엄과 권리에 있어 동등하다. 인간은 천부적으로 이성과 양심을 부여받았으며 서로 형첸개의 청신으로 헹동하여야 한다.

Translation:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Languages evolve over time. Historical linguists trace these changes and describe how languages relate to one another. Language families group languages together, according to similarities in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Languages within a same family derive from a common ancestor, called a **proto-language** (Nowak & Krakauer, 1999). Membership in a given family is determined through **comparative linguistics**, i.e., studying and comparing the characteristics of the languages in question. Linguists use the metaphor of a family tree to depict the relationships among languages. One of the largest families is **IndoEuropean**, with more than 4000 languages or dialects represented. Indo-European languages include Spanish, English, Hindi/Urdu, Portuguese, Bengali, Russian, and Punjabi, each with over 100 million speakers, followed by German, French and Persian. Nearly half the human population speaks an Indo-European language as a first language (Skirgård, 2017). How the languages are related can be shown in the similar terms for "mother" (see sidebar).

Mother in Indo-European languages

- Sanskrit *matar*
- Greek *mater*

Some regions have particularly rich linguistic traditions, such as is the case for Africa and India. In India, there are not only Indo-European languages spoken (Hindi, Punjabi), but also languages from other families such as Dravidian (Telugu, Tamil), Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and a few other minor language families. Papua/New Guinea has a particularly rich variety of languages; with over 850 languages, it is the most linguistically diverse place on earth. In such cultures, most people are multilingual, often speaking 3 or more languages, along with a **lingua franca** - a common denominator -, such as Swahili in parts of Africa, English in India, or Tok Pisin, an English-based creole, in New Guinea.

There are languages which do not belong to families, known as **language isolates** (Campbell, 2010). Well-known examples include Basque, a language spoken in the border area between France and Spain, and Korean. Language isolates tend to develop in geographical isolation, separated from other regions, for example, through mountain ranges or the sea. In some cases, geographical features such as dense forests may result in different dialects or even languages spoken in areas which are actually quite close to one another. A **dialect** refers to a variety of a language that is used by a particular group of speakers, defined normally regionally, but could be related to social class or ethnicity as well. Dialects are closely related to one another and normally mutually intelligible.

Language Is Arbitrary and Symbolic

Words, by themselves, do not have any inherent meaning. Humans give meaning to them, and their meanings change across time.

For example, when my cousin Eric was three, I babysat him one afternoon and told him I needed to cut his chicken before he could eat. I took out a knife and, wide-eyed, and asked, “Is that a ***sword***?” I laughed - not because he was wrong, but because his question perfectly showed how language is shaped by our experiences. In his three-year-old world of fairy tales and cartoons, “sword” was the only word he knew for something sharp. He hadn’t yet learned the word “knife,” so he used the closest label he had available to him. It was a reminder that *meanings are in people, not in words* - what a word represents depends entirely on the person using it and the context they bring to it. Read more below in "Student Voices" about the communication misunderstandings that can occur because of arbitrary language differences.

Let's have some fun with words. Words are like sandwiches - they have layers. Just as "bologna" means lunch meat to some and "nonsense" to others, words have two types of meanings: **denotative** and **connotative.** The **denotative meaning** is the straightforward dictionary definition. For instance, if you looked up the word "chicken," you would find it defined as a "bird" and not a "coward." In contrast, **connotative meaning** refers to the emotional or cultural associations that a word may carry, which can vary across people and communities.

Puns are a great way to see this difference in action. Consider the following "Dad jokes": Joke #1: "I used to be a banker... but I lost interest." The denotative meaning of *interest* refers to the percentage earned on money in a bank, while the connotative meaning refers to enthusiasm. Joke #2: "I'm reading a book about anti-gravity... it's impossible to put down." Here, *impossible to put down* could literally mean something that defies gravity, while the connotative meaning reflects how we often describe a very engaging book. Joke #3: "I don't trust stairs... they're always up to something." Denotatively, stairs go upward, but connotatively, the phrase *up to something* often implies mischievous behavior.

These jokes work because they rely on the playful overlap between denotative and connotative meanings. The dictionary gives us the basics, but it's the extra layers of meaning that create humor, emotion, and cultural nuance. In other words, when it comes to language, it's always good to *read between the puns.* Ba dum bump!

Student Voices



Figure 5.1.1: Filipino Rice Dessert

Growing up in the Philippines, I was surrounded by food that felt like home. Filipino food is deeply tied to our culture—we even have a saying, "Kapag busog ang tiyan, busog ang puso," which means "When the stomach is full, the heart is happy." Because of that, food naturally becomes the easiest way for me to share where I come from.

One afternoon, I was at my boyfriend's house. He comes from Mexican heritage, and as someone who is an immigrant and still adjusting to life in the U.S., I've always appreciated how curious and welcoming they are about my culture. When they asked me about Filipino food, I immediately lit up. It felt comforting to talk about something that reminded me of home.

I started sharing one of my favorite Filipino desserts: puto—a steamed rice cake that's soft, slightly sweet, and similar to a fluffy muffin. Growing up, my mom would make puto in the afternoons, and it became a little ritual of comfort in our household. So naturally, I wanted to introduce it to them.

But the moment I said the word puto, everyone paused and then burst out laughing. They kept asking, "Did you really say... puto?" At first, I was confused, but then my boyfriend explained that puto is a curse word in Spanish. I suddenly felt embarrassed, like I had accidentally said something offensive without realizing it. I worried they thought I was joking or trying to be inappropriate.

> I quickly tried to explain that in Filipino culture, puto is just a dessert—one that families share during merienda, gatherings, or celebrations. It took a moment, but once they understood, we all laughed about it together. The misunderstanding turned into a moment of learning for all of us: a reminder that the same word can carry completely different meanings across cultures.
>
> In the end, what could have been an awkward moment actually helped me feel more connected to them. It showed me how cultural translation can get messy, but also how genuine curiosity and patience can turn confusion into connection.
>
> Francheska Castro, California Community College Student

Language Evolves

Many people view language as fixed, but in fact, language constantly changes. As time passes and technology changes, people add new words to their language, repurpose old ones, and discard archaic ones. New additions to American English in the last few decades include *blog*, *sexting*, and *selfie*. Repurposed additions to American English include *cyberbullying*, *tweet*, and *app* (from application). Whereas *affright*, *cannonade*, and *fain* are becoming extinct in modern American English. Other times, speakers of a language borrow words and phrases from other languages and incorporate them into their own. *Wisconsin, Oregon, and Wyoming* were all borrowed from Native American languages. *Typhoon* is from Mandarin Chinese, and *influenza* is from Italian.

Language Shapes Our Thought

What would your life be like if you had been raised in a country other than the one where you grew up? Or suppose you had been born male instead of female, or vice versa. You would have learned another set of customs, values, traditions, other language patterns, and ways of communicating. You would be a different person who communicated in different ways. The link between language and culture and the idea that language shapes how we think about our world was famously described in the work of Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir. The **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** postulates that your native language has a profound influence on how you see the world, that you perceive reality in the context of the language you have available to describe it. According to Sapir (1929), "The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. The world in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached" (p. 162). From this perspective, all language use – from the words we use to describe objects to the way sentences are structured – is tied closely to the culture in which it is spoken. In 1940, Whorf wrote:

> The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for people's mental activity, for their analysis of impressions, for their synthesis of their mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar and differs, from slightly to greatly, among different grammars...We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages (p. 231).

Whorf studied native American languages such as Hopi and was struck by differences to English which pointed to different ways of viewing the world, for example, how the Hopi language has no present, past, or future tense verbs. Instead, it divides the world into what Whorf called the manifested and unmanifest domains. The manifested domain deals with the physical universe, including the present, the immediate past and future; the verb system uses the same basic structure for all of them. The unmanifest domain involves the remote past and the future, as well as the world of desires, thought, and life forces. The set of verb forms dealing with this domain are consistent for all of these areas, and are different from the manifested ones. Also, there are no words for hours, minutes, or days of the week.

Taken to its extreme, this kind of **linguistic determinism** would prevent native speakers of different languages from having the same thoughts or sharing a worldview. In other words, without the vocabulary for something, people would be unable to even conceive of it. For example, if a language had no word for “freedom,” its speakers supposedly could not imagine the concept at all. Most scholars find this view too rigid. Instead, what is more widely accepted today is the idea of **linguistic relativity** - the idea that language influences and shapes how we see the world, but it does not absolutely determine our thoughts. For example, English distinguishes between “blue” and “green,” but in Vietnamese the word *xanh* can refer to both, with context clarifying which is meant. This doesn’t mean Vietnamese speakers cannot tell the difference between blue and green - it simply means their language groups the colors differently. After all, translation is in fact possible, and bilingualism exists, both of which phenomena should be problematic in a strict interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is also the case that many cultures are multilingual, with children growing up exposed to multiple languages. These realities highlight that while language shapes thought, it does not set unbreakable boundaries around it.

- Linguistic determinism: language controls thought in culture.
- Linguistic relativity: language influences thought in culture, and therefore differences among languages cause differences in the thoughts of their speakers. Hua (2014), P. 176

Regardless of which linguistic theory one accepts, it is widely agreed that vocabulary of a language reflects important aspects of everyday life. Linguist Anna Wierzbicka (2013) offers striking examples from the Australian Aboriginal language Warlpiri. This language includes words such as *japi* (entrance to a sugar ant's nest), *laja* (hole or burrow of a lizard), *kuyu* (meat-bearing animal; which includes edible birds but excludes other birds), *karnpi* (fat under skin of an emu), *papapapa-ma* (to make the sound of a male emu calling to its chicks), and *yulu* (the limp or relaxed state of a slain kangaroo whose hind legs have been broken in preparation for cooking).

> *As these examples illustrate, the words of a language reflect the speakers' special interests. For the speakers of a particular language, their words "fit the world" as they see it—but how they see it depends, to some extent, on what they want to see and what they pay attention to. This is true also of European languages, and English is no exception, either. The conviction that the words of our native language fit the world as it really is, is deeply rooted in the thinking of many people, particularly those who have never been forced to move, existentially, from one language into another and to leave the certainties of their home language (Wierzbicka, 2014, p. 20).*

Learning a second language leads one early on to appreciate the fact that there may not be a one-to-one correspondence between words in one language and those in another. While the dictionary definitions (denotation) may be the same, the actual usage in any given context (connotation) may be quite different. The word *amigo* in Spanish is the equivalent of the word friend in English, but the relationships described by that word can be quite different. During my travels in Guatemala, I experienced "*hola amigo,*" as a common greeting, even among strangers. Just as in English, a Facebook "friend" is quite different from a childhood "friend". The German word *Bier*, as does the English "beer", refers to an alcoholic drink made from barley, hops, and water. In a German context, the word is used to describe an everyday drink commonly consumed with meals or in other social situations. In the American English context, usage of the word, "beer," immediately brings to the fore its status as alcohol, thus a beverage that is strictly regulated and its consumption restricted.



Figure 5.1.1: Beer in Germany: a drink like any other

Differences in the words available to describe everyday experiences become clear when we compare languages or look at how certain groups use vocabulary in specialized ways. For example, dog lovers often know dozens of terms for breeds, coat types, and behaviors that the average person might simply call "dog." Similarly, sailing enthusiasts can easily distinguish between a jib, mainsail, and spinnaker, while most people would just say "sail." In these cases, the depth of vocabulary reflects the group's interests and expertise, not whether someone is a native speaker of the language.

Sometimes groups develop their own specialized vocabulary called **jargon**, which usually refers to technical or professional language. Think of the way gamers use terms like "nerf," "grind," or "GG," or how medical professionals use words like "hypertension" instead of "high blood pressure." Another related concept is **argot**, a kind of coded or secret language meant to exclude outsiders. For instance, texting abbreviations or slang used by teenagers might feel like an argot to parents, while

historically, criminal groups have used argot to communicate without being understood by authorities.

Less immediately evident than vocabulary differences in comparing languages are differences in grammatical structures. If, for example, a language has different personal pronouns for direct address, such as the informal *tu* in French and the formal *vous*, both meaning 'you', that distinction is a reflection of one aspect of the culture. It indicates that there is a built-in awareness and significance to social differentiation and that a more formal level of language use is available. Native speakers of English may have difficulty in learning how to use the different forms of address in French, or as they exist in other languages such as German or Spanish. Speakers of American English, in particular, are inclined towards informal modes of address, moving to a first-name basis as soon as possible. Using informal addresses inappropriately can cause considerable social friction. It takes a good deal of language socialization to acquire this kind of pragmatic ability, that is to say, sufficient exposure to the forms being used correctly. While native speakers of English may deplore the formality of *vous* or its equivalent in other languages, in cultures where these distinctions exist, they provide a valuable device for maintaining relational distance when desired, for clearly distinguishing friends from acquaintances, and for preserving social harmony in institutional settings. Expanding on this notion, students of Korean learn early on in their studies that there is not just a distinction between familiar and formal "you", as exists in many languages, but that the code of respect and politeness of Korean culture dictates different vocabulary, intonation, and speech patterns depending on one's relationship to the addressee. This can extend to nonverbal conventions as well, such as bowing or increasing personal space.

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5.2: Moving Between Languages

Bilingualism and Multilingualism

The complex identities created through the forces of globalization, mass migration, and the growth of social media, have also resulted in linguistic complexity (Piller, 2017). Individuals are much more likely than in the past to be exposed, in person or online, to speakers of other languages. The plurality of languages may well happen within one's own family. As travel and migration have brought more people from different cultures together, there has been a growth in families in which parents have different mother tongues. Children in such households are likely to be brought up speaking both languages, becoming bilingual. **Bilingualism** may as well result from individuals or families migrating and continuing to speak the language of their home culture, while learning that of the host country. Studies have shown that not only do bilinguals have the advantage of likely fluency in two languages, but that the process of growing up bilingual also has a positive effect on brain development (Albert & Obler, 1978).

Bilinguals may differ in their level of proficiency in the languages they speak. Normally a bilingual will have one dominant language (Grosjean, 2001). It may be, for example, that children speaking the language of their parents at home may not develop a good reading or writing ability in that language. Some schools and universities in which there are large numbers of such "heritage" speakers, often have specially designed courses which help such students develop full capabilities in those languages. People who know more than one language have been shown to be more adept at language learning (Kaushanskaya & Marian, 2009).

In most parts of the world today, most individuals have at least some capability in a second language: "The majority of the world's population uses more than one language on a regular basis and **monolingualism** is by and large a historical and Anglophone anomaly" (Piller, 2017, pp. 71-72). This is a matter of necessity in countries such as Luxembourg, Nigeria, or Indonesia in which there are multiple languages coexisting in geographically close quarters. Inhabitants of smaller countries, with their own national languages, such as Denmark, Estonia, or Nauru (an island country in Micronesia) will, due to economic and practical concerns, typically learn the language of larger neighboring countries. However, in this context as in others, political and nationalist issues may influence language learning choices.

Many countries have more than one officially recognized national language, including Canada (English and French), Switzerland (French, German, Italian, Romansch), South Africa (11 languages), and India (22 languages). It's not the case that in **multilingual** societies all speakers are necessarily multilingual. Particular languages may be spoken predominately in one region, as is the case for French in Canada or Italian in Switzerland. In other cases, language use may be distributed according to ethnic heritage, as can be seen in Singapore or Malaysia. In some countries, there may be different versions of a common language, as is the case in Switzerland with Swiss German and standard German, or in Arabic, with the "high" version being Modern Standard Arabic, used in writing and in formal speech, and the many regional, colloquial versions (Egyptian, Maghrebi, Peninsular, etc.).



Figure 5.2.1: Tamil, English and Hindi named board at the Tirusulam suburban railway station in Chennai.

Bilingualism and multilingualism create both opportunities and challenges for intercultural communication. Knowing more than one language allows people to bridge cultural divides, but differences in proficiency or social attitudes toward certain languages can lead to misunderstandings or unequal participation. These dynamics highlight the importance of flexibility and respect when communicating across cultures. Building on this, we now turn to the topic of second language acquisition to explore how people learn and develop new language skills in intercultural settings.

Learning a Second Language

Learning a second language provides insight into how language works. Many monolinguals are likely to assume that the difference between languages is largely semantic, that is to say that moving from one language to another is simply a matter of substituting words. We have seen in the example of Warlpiri how far that can be from reality. In fact, the very same word equivalents can be put together in very different ways. Some languages such as Arabic make rich use of metaphorical language, for example. In all languages there are idioms and fixed expressions that have meaning beyond the literal denotations of constituent words. One of the ways words are used differently is in collocations – groupings of words that conventionally go together. In English, for example, we say "make your bed" but "do your homework", with the verbs not being interchangeable despite similarity in meaning. The lexical approach to language learning emphasizes the study of vocabulary in context, including collocations and idiomatic expressions (Lewis, 1993).

How sentences are put together can vary significantly by language. Learning German, for example, will expose learners to syntax

(word order) that is quite different from the way sentences are put together in many languages, i.e. subject – verb – object (SVO). In German, that word order can be used, but it is common to have something other than the subject at the beginning of the sentence. At the beginning of newscasts on German television, it is common to hear the phrase, *Ihnen einen guten Abend*, literally "to you (formal you) a good evening". German indicates the role of a noun or pronoun in the sentence not by its placement but by its form or ending. These morphological variations – changes in endings – are crucial to understanding what a sentence says. Sme languages build meaning by stacking smaller word parts, like **prefixes** (added to the beginning) and **suffixes** (added to the end), onto a root word. A humorous example from German is *Donaudampfschifffahrtsgesellschaftskapitänskajüttenschlossschlüssel,* which translates to “the key to the lock of the cabin of the captain of a Danube steamboat company.” While this word is grammatically correct, it’s not commonly used 0 it’s more of a playful showcase of how German allows long compound words through continuous suffix addition. German isn’t the only language with this kind of structure. In **Eskimo-Aluet languages**, for instance, speakers often build what would be full sentences in English by attaching multiple prefixes and suffixes to a single root. This process, called **polysynthesis**, allows for highly compact and expressive communication. These examples show how different languages organize meaning in unique ways - and remind us that language is flexible, creative, and often quite funny (see example in sidebar).

Sample Inuit word (Eskimo-Aleut language)

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

Tusaatsiarunnanngittualuujunga

I can't hear very well.

This long word is composed of a root word *tusaa*- 'to hear' followed by five suffixes:

- -**tsiaq**- "well"
- -**junnaq**- "be able to"
- -**nngit**- negation
- -**tu(q)** indicative third-person singular
- -**alu(k)-:** augmentative ("very")
- -**u**-: "be"
- -**junga**: indicative first-person singular (itself composed of the indicative morpheme -ju- and the first person mark -nga)

Inuit grammar/Wikipedia(opens in new window)

In some languages, learning sometimes subtle variations in pronunciation can be crucially important. In Mandarin Chinese, for example, there are four tones in which syllables are pronounced and the exact same phoneme (minimal unit of sound) can have

four different meanings depending on the tone (high, low, rising, rising and falling). The syllable “ma” in Mandarin could be *mā* (mother), *má* (to bother), *mǎ* (horse), *mà* (to scold), or *ma* (neutral tone, used as an interrogative particle). One of the helpful tools linguists have created in the field of phonetics (the production of sounds) and phonology (how sounds are put together) is the IPA, the International Phonetic Alphabet (MacMahon, 1986). It allows an accurate representation of sounds in all human languages, including the variety of clicks in some African languages. In some cases, the IPA transcription is easy to understand, for example, “good” as [gud]. In other cases, symbols are used that are not part of the regular alphabet, for example, thicker as [θɪkə] or child as [tʃaɪld].

The degree of difficulty in learning a second language can vary depending on a number of factors, such as motivation, time commitment, and innate ability to learn. Some learners are able to imitate very closely the sounds of a native speaker; others have great difficulty in that area, particularly if they start learning the language later in life. **The critical period hypothesis** claims that there is an ideal time window for acquiring language, namely as children or adolescents (Harley & Wang, 1997). This is particularly true for developing native-like pronunciation and fluent oral communication skills. Older learners, on the other hand, tend to do well with learning grammar and structure, the analytical aspect of language learning. The degree of difficulty is also dependent on the level of fluency and accuracy one hopes to attain. People learn languages for different reasons, and some learners may just need a reading ability.



Figure 5.2.2: Learning German at the Smarter Language Academy in Nigeria

Most current theories of **Second Language Acquisition** (SLA) advocate a sociocognitive approach, combining learning of vocabulary and grammar through drills and repetition and culturally strategic knowledge and strategic competence, i.e., what's appropriate to say in a given context. The current trend in language instruction is to put more emphasis on the latter. This involves developing practical and pragmatically appropriate speaking ability (Savignon, 1983). The emphasis is on use of functional language in real communicative contexts, often using a task-based approach. This involves having students use real world situations to practice language. There is a growing recognition that for most learners, functional ability in a second language should be the goal.

Immigrants sometimes reach a level of ability that provides basic functionality in the language. At that point they may stop formal training or make conscious efforts to improve, their pronunciation and grammar becoming "fossilized" at the functional level achieved (Acton, 1984). In the field of SLA today, it is recognized that language learners vary considerably in their goals and needs and that not every learner needs to develop native-like pronunciation or perfect grammar. The standard for most learners is likely to be intelligibility, being able to make oneself understood. In some cases, mispronunciation of individual sounds is less important for intelligibility than intonation or idiomatic word choice. Unfortunately, the public at large does not share the perspective of SLA, so those who speak with a noticeable accent or use faulty grammar can face prejudice and discrimination, despite being eminently intelligible.

One of the other determiners of language learning ease or difficulty is the similarity or dissimilarity of the second language to one's native tongue. It is clearly much easier for a native English speaker to learn Spanish or German than to learn Arabic or Mandarin. For those languages, a completely different writing system must be learned. It's also the case that Spanish and German, like English, are members of the same language family of Indo-European, which means that they have similar genealogies. As

a result, there are similarities in grammar and vocabulary. A high number of **cognates** – words which resemble each other – between the two languages can be very helpful, especially in the early stages of language learning.

Language and language learning are both such complex phenomena, that there is not likely to be one "right" way or best approach to SLA (see Godwin-Jones, 2018). The diversity of learner backgrounds, available learning resources, and level of need/interest mean that no individual is likely to learn a new language in precisely the same way. This has led to a great deal of interest in how language development can be personalized to individual learners (see Godwin-Jones, 2017c; Ortega, 2017).

Ultimately, if or how well learners acquire a second language depends on the individual. One's attitude is a crucial factor. If one is highly motivated to learn because of extrinsic factors, such as a migrant's need for functional ability in an adopted country, that can lead to more intense and faster learning. There may be compelling professional reasons for needing to learn a second language, such as being posted to a foreign country. Intrinsic motivating factors may play a role. Those might include a desire to learn more about another culture to maintain or establish a connection to one's ethnic heritage. **Polyglots**, speakers of multiple languages, are motivated to learn as many languages as possible.



Figure 5.2.3: Aurtor JRR Tolkien knew many languages and invented languages.

In any case, maintaining a positive attitude is important in intercultural communication generally, and is of great benefit as well in language learning. A spirit of openness and curiosity is needed. If one is willing to use the language learned to engage in conversation with other learners or native speakers, faster progress is likely. The author of a well-known textbook on intercultural communication entitled one of the chapters "Language as a barrier" (Jandt, 2012). In fact, the opposite is true, learning a second language is a gateway into another culture, the most effective way to get an inside track on the perspective from which speakers of the language view the world.

Language Learning and Technology

"A foreign language is not simply something to add to our repertoire of skills, but a personalized tool that enables us to expand and express our identity or sense of self in new and interesting ways and with new kinds of people" (Ushioda, 2011, p. 204).

Today, online learning tools have transformed language learning by making resources widely accessible, flexible, and interactive. Learners can use apps like Duolingo or Mango Languages, connect with peers through tandem learning platforms like Mixxer, or join MOOC's (Massively Open Online Courses). These tools not only support vocabulary and grammar learning but also create opportunities for authentic conversations with native speakers, offering exposure to cultural perspectives that classroom instruction alone may not provide (Brammerts, 1996; Ushioda, 2011). However, the effectiveness of such tools depends on how they are used - some focus heavily on drills and may neglect cultural context, which is crucial for successful communication across cultures (Lord, 2015). For intercultural communication, this means that language learning online is not just about mastering words, but about engaging with people, building cultural awareness, and developing the skills to navigate real conversations across cultural boundaries.



Figure 5.2.4: Ad for Rosetta Stone promising social benefits

English as a world language

Often there is a close and natural connection between the language one learns and the culture represented by that language. In fact, interest in the target culture may be the starting point for learning a new language. In some cases, there is a tighter connection to a single culture than for others. Learners of Japanese, for example, are in a different position from learners of Spanish in that there are fewer regional variations and only one nation-state where Japanese is spoken. From that perspective, English is even more diverse culturally than Spanish. That derives not just from the fact that English is the official language of a variety of countries, but that it also functions as the lingua franca for exchanges between people with different native languages. According to the *International Centre for Migration Policy Development* (ICMPD, 2025), English remains the dominant language for international communication, especially in education, business, and diplomacy. The number of non-native English speakers now far exceeds native speakers, reinforcing its status as a culturally diverse and globally adaptive language.English is seen in many countries as an essential tool for social and economic advancement. At the same time, English is sometimes seen as an instrument of cultural imperialism, given the history of colonization, evangelization and spread of US consumer/popular culture from the Anglophone world. The spread of English is often accompanied by Western, more specifically Anglo-Saxon cultural values.

The role that English as a language plays in a given culture may vary considerably. Given its history as a former English colony,

Hong Kong, for example, is a city in which there are many people who speak English in their everyday lives. Hong Kongers use English "quite comfortably with one another when they are at school or in the office. It is considered strange, however, to use it in daily conversation" (Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012, p. 6). This is in contrast to Singapore, India, or South Africa, where there may be speakers of a variety of other languages so that English is needed as a lingua franca. In Hong Kong, by contrast, English is not needed, as native Hong Kongers speak Cantonese. Scollon, Scollon & Jones (2012) point out that using English in Hong Kong outside of institutional settings carries with it social significance:

> *[This is] based partly on the groups of people that use it such as teachers and other authority figures as well as non-Cantonese speaking "foreigners," and so by appropriating English into casual conversation with another Cantonese speaker, one might be claiming a certain affiliation with those groups of people, or one might be thought by the people to whom one is talking to be claiming such an affiliation, to be "showing off ," or, at the very least, to be acting unduly formal (p. 6).*

The different social significance of speaking English across cultures points to the inherent cultural forces language embodies beyond serving as a means of communication. Language choice can be a way to position oneself socially. In many cultures, English may be an important component of individual identity and agency.

The interest in English has resulted in a boom in English classes in many countries. At the same time, there has been a shift in how English is taught as a second language. It is no longer the case that learning English is tied necessarily to learning as well about

the culture of Great Britain or the USA. The kind of English taught may in fact not be either British English or North American English, but rather a version which adapts to a local variety of English or strives to model International or World English. The latter concept has evolved out of the desire to minimize cultural influences from North America and Great Britain in language learning, as well as to deal with differences in usage (spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation) among Englishes in Anglophone countries. There have even been attempts, such as Basic Global English, to create a kind of neutral, bare-bones version of the language (Grzega, 2006). On the other hand, there have been efforts locally to teach English within the context of a local culture. That has been the case, for example, in Vietnam (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996) and Pakistan (Malik, 1993).

Many people are learning English for highly utilitarian reasons, to advance socially or professionally. As a result, there is a lot of interest in "English for Special Purposes," English classes tailored to those with particular professional needs, such as business, tourism, or a highly technical field. This may lead to a limited proficiency in English within a narrow semantic field. An example is Aviation English, called *AirSpeak*, the version of English universally used by pilots and air traffic controllers (International Civil Aviation Organization, 2003). There have been some concerns expressed that pilots with *AirSpeak*-level English proficiency can deal very well with routine situations that occur in the air, but might have some difficulty describing unusual events in English. The example given in the sidebar illustrates potential issues with language, but also possibly with sociocultural factors, namely the possible reluctance of a pilot to admit ignorance.

Example: Airspeak

On August 2, 1976, a Boeing 707 cargo flight departed from Tehran to Seoul and collided with the mountain due to a wrong turn. The following is the conversation between Air Traffic Controller (ATC) and the pilot. Standard Instrument Departure (SID) is published flight procedure followed by aircraft immediately after takeoff from an airport

- ATC to Pilot: “Follow SID 11”
- Pilot to ATC: “What is SID 11?”
- ATC to Pilot: “Standard Instrument Departure 11”
- Pilot action: Silence

Hazrati & Touiserkani (2016)

In the early days of the Internet there was concern that English would crowd out all other languages. That has not, however, been the case. Statistics show much faster Internet growth in countries where English is not the dominant language (Internet World Stats, 2017). In 1996, more than 80 percent of Internet users were native English speakers. By 2010, that percentage had dropped to 27.3 percent. Online services are increasingly available in multiple languages, Wikipedia in 295 languages and Facebook in 101 (Ortega, 2017). However, it remains a reality that English growth may lead to the decline of other languages. In some countries, private universities have opened up in which the language of instruction is English. The popularity since 2012 of MOOCs, which have predominantly been offered in English, from US universities, has led some to worry about that form of distance learning in English replacing local educational resources (Godwin-Jones, 2014). Whether the cause is or is not the spread of English, it does remain that a large number of the world's languages are today threatened with extinction (Choi, 2014).

In sum, English has evolved beyond its colonial and national origins to become a global tool for communication, education, and professional advancement. As we have seen, language is not neutral as it shapes and reflects identity, power, and belonging. The global rise of English, while opening doors for many, also raises important questions about cultural dominance and linguistic equity. This brings us to a critical concern in intercultural communication: the fate of endangered languages. As English and other dominant languages expand, thousands of smaller languages face extinction - taking with them unique worldviews, traditions, and ways of relating to others. Understanding the loss of these languages is not just a linguistic issue - it’s also a cultural issue. In the next section, we’ll explore how language death affects intercultural understanding and why preserving linguistic diversity matters for the future of global communication.

Endangered Languages

As of 2025, over 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide, yet more than 2,500 are endangered and roughly 2,000 have fewer than 1, 000 speakers (ICMPD, 2025). While linguistic diversity remains vast, global communication is dominated by a handful of languages - especially English as we read in the above section. According to Rao (2025), there are now over 1.5 billion speakers of English, most of whom use it as a second language. Languages like Chinese and Tamil continue to be among the oldest still spoken today, reflecting deep cultural heritage and resilience (Pulse Nigeria, 2025). These trends highlight the tension between

global language spread and the urgent need to preserve endangered languages, a key concern in intercultural communication.

It is estimated that nearly 40% of the world's 7,000+ languages are endangered, with many at risk of extinction within the next century (Couturier, 2025; IUCN, 2024). This threat is especially acute for indigenous languages in regions such as the Americas and Asia, where globalization, urbanization, and the dominance of world languages like English, Spanish, and Mandarin have accelerated language loss. In North America alone, of the 165 Indigenous languages still spoken, only 8 have more than 10,000 speakers, while approximately 75 are spoken only by a few elders, placing them on the brink of extinction (Couturier, 2025).



Figure 5.2.5: Linguist Gregory Anderson interviews a Koro speaker in India.

The disappearance of these languages represent more than a loss of vocabulary - it signals the erosion of human cultural capital. For languages without written systems, the death of the last speaker often means the loss of oral histories, traditional knowledge, and ecological wisdom. For example, when words for native plants vanish, so too does the knowledge of their medicinal or ritual uses (IUCN, 2024). Each language encodes a unique worldview, and when it dies, a culture may die with it.

Efforts to preserve endangered languages include field linguists recording native speakers and archiving their speech. Advances in digital technology have made documentation more accessible, but they also introduce dominant languages into previously isolated communities, sometimes hastening the decline of local tongues. The challenge, then, is not only to record these languages but to revitalize them in ways that honour their cultural roots and support intergenerational transmission.

Cultural Close-up: Nushu - A Script of Sisterhood and Survival

Nüshu (女书), meaning "women's writing," is a rare syllabic script developed by Yao women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. Unlike standard Chinese characters, Nüshu was used exclusively by women to express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in a society where female literacy was discouraged and their voices often silenced. Passed down through embroidery, letters, and songs, Nüshu became a quiet form of resistance and solidarity.

By the late 20th century, Nüshu was nearly extinct, with only a handful of fluent users remaining. Its decline was due to modernization, increased female literacy in standard Chinese, and the fading of traditional village life. But recent efforts—like the NüshuRescue project—are breathing new life into the script. Using AI and machine learning, researchers have created the first publicly available Nüshu–Chinese parallel corpus (NCGold), enabling translation and preservation of this endangered language with minimal human input.

Nüshu's revival is more than linguistic—it's cultural. It reminds us that language is deeply tied to identity, gender, and power. In intercultural communication, Nüshu challenges us to consider whose voices are heard, whose are hidden, and how preserving endangered languages can restore lost narratives.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Nüshu reflect the intersection of language, gender, and power in traditional Chinese society?
2. What are the ethical and cultural implications of using AI to preserve endangered languages like Nüshu?
3. In what ways can the revival of Nüshu inform broader efforts to preserve other endangered languages and cultural practices?

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Translation & Interpretation

Because no one can learn every language, we rely on translators and interpreters. On the surface level, translation and interpretation seem to be much the same thing, with one skill relying on written texts and the other occurring orally. Both *translation* and *interpretation* enable communication across language boundaries from *source* to *target*. Both need deep cultural and linguistic understanding along with expert knowledge of the subject area and the ability to communicate clearly, but this is where the similarities end.

Translation generally involves the process of producing a written text that refers to something written in another language. Traditionally, the *translator* would read the *source* in its original language, decipher its meaning, then write, rewrite, and proofread the content in the *target* language to ensure the original meaning, style and content are preserved. Some *translators* use computer-aided tools to convert the *source* into a file type for electronic translation, then proof-read each section of the text for quality of content, meaning, and style in the *target* language. Transferring meaning from one language to another can sometimes make for interesting twists. The *New York Times* Sterngold, J. (11/15/98) noted that the title of the 1998 film *There's Something About Mary* proved difficult to translate when it was released in foreign markets. In Poland, where blonde jokes are popular and common, the film title (translated back to English for our use) was *For the Love of a Blonde*. In France, *Mary at All Costs* communicated the idea, while in Thailand *My True Love Will Stand All Outrageous Events* dropped the reference to Mary altogether. Capturing ideas with words is a challenge when the intended audience speaks the same language, but across languages and cultures, the challenge becomes intense. **Translators** are often experts in their fields of knowledge as well as linguists fluent in two or more languages with excellent written communication skills.

Interpretation is the process of orally expressing what is said or written in another language. Contrary to popular belief, *interpretation* isn't a word-for-word translation of a spoken message. If it was, it wouldn't make sense to the target audience. *Interpreters* need to transpose the *source* language within the given context, preserving its original meaning, but rephrasing idioms, colloquialisms, and other culturally-specific references in ways that the *target* audience can understand. They may have to do this in a simultaneous manner to the original speaker or by speaking only during the breaks provided by the original speaker. **Interpreters** are also often experts in fields of knowledge, cultures, and languages with excellent memories.

The roles of translators and interpreters are very complex. Not everyone who has levels of fluency in two languages makes a good *translator* or *interpreter*. Complex relationships between people, intercultural situations, and intercultural contexts involve more than just language fluency, but rather culture fluency.

The roles of translators and interpreters highlight a key principle in intercultural communication: language is inseparable from culture, and successful communication depends on understanding both. Whether written or spoken, transferring meaning across cultures requires not just linguistic skill but cultural fluency - an awareness of how people interpret, relate, and respond within their own cultural frameworks.

Contributors and Attributions

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5.3: Variations in Communication Styles

As has been established, language is not culture free. If your intercultural communication is to be effective, you cannot ignore the broader cultural context that gives words meaning. Cultural rules about when and how certain speech acts can be performed may differ greatly. Routine formulas such as greetings, leave-taking, thanking, apologizing and so on do not follow the same, or even similar rules, across cultures causing misunderstandings and confusion. How language is used in a particular culture is strongly related to the values a culture emphasizes, and how it believes that the relations between humans ought to be.

Cultural Connection: An offer of coffee: What does it really mean?

In some cultures an offer of coffee after a meal is generally recognized as a polite way to indicate to the guests that they ought to leave soon if they do not wish to outstay their welcome. In other cultures, an offer of coffee on a similar occasion is just an act of the host's kindness (or even an invitation to the guests to stay a little bit longer than they had intended). If interactants from different cultural backgrounds are unaware of the differences in their respective mental sets, misunderstandings are likely to occur. Misunderstandings of this sort involve the carryover of culture-specific knowledge from a situation of intra-cultural communication to a situation of intercultural communication.

Žegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 169



Communication Styles

Language is more than vocabulary and grammar - it's a reflection of how people think, relate, and express meaning within their cultural worlds. Social scientists and linguists have long studied how individuals and groups use language to navigate relationships, convey emotion, and assert identity. These studies show that communication is not just about what is said, but *how* it is said - and *how much* is left unsaid. Understanding these differences is vital for interpreting verbal messages accurately, particularly in intercultural contexts. One of the most influential frameworks for analyzing these variations is the concept of **high-context and low-context communication**, which helps explain why some cultures rely heavily on shared understanding and indirect cues, while other focus on explicit, direct language.

High and Low Context

Imagine you're texting your best friend during a group chat, and you send: "👀" or "That look." Instantly, they reply with, "I *know* exactly what you're thinking." You didn't need to explain the situation, name the person, or spell out the drama - they just got it. That's high-context communication in action. In high context communication the meaning is in the people, or more specifically, the relationship between the people as opposed to just the words. In high-context cultures, body language is as important and sometimes more important than the actual words spoken. In high-context cultures, such as those found in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the physical context of the message carries a great deal of importance. People tend to be more indirect and to expect the person they are communicating with to "read between the lines" to decode the implicit part of their message. *High context* cultures are very often collectivistic as well.

In low-context messages, little (or "low") context is needed for comprehension because the essence of the communication is conveyed by the words used and little information is conveyed by nonverbal means. In low context communication, the speaker is expected to be responsible for constructing a clear message that the listener can decode easily. You're probably familiar with

some well-known low-context mottos: “Say what you mean” and “Don’t beat around the bush.” The guiding principle is to minimize the margins of misunderstanding or doubt. Low-context communication aspires to get straight to the point. Many *low context* cultures are individualist so people openly express their views, and tend to make important information obvious to others. The American legal system, for example, relies on low context communication.

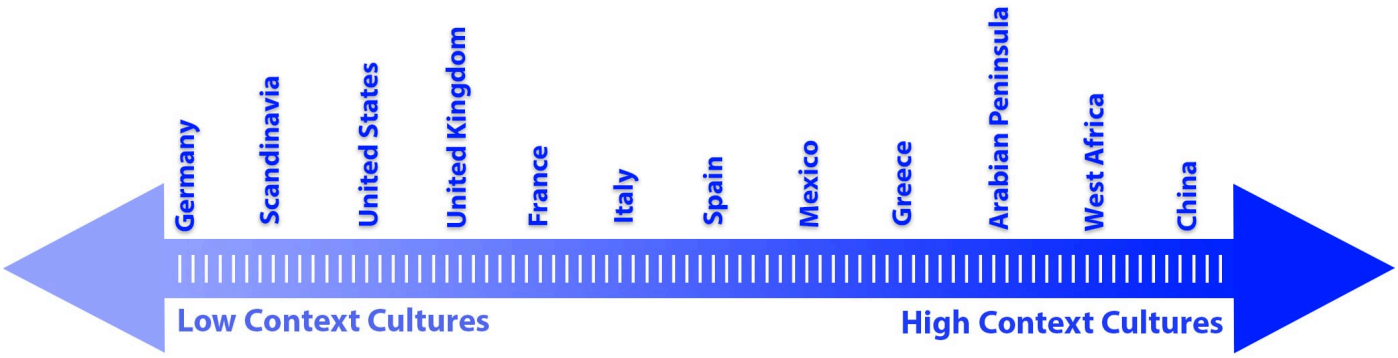


Figure 5.3.1: A graph which shows the level of contect in various world cultures

While some cultures are low or high context, in general terms, there can also be individual or contextual differences within cultures. People who spend a lot of time together in the same group inevitably develop high context ways of communicating. In the example above between the two friends, they are using high context communication, however, The United States is considered a low context culture. Countries such as Germany and Sweden are also low context while Japan and China are high context. Communication between people from high-context and low-context cultures can be confusing. In business interactions, people from low-context cultures tend to listen primarily to the words spoken; they tend not to be as cognizant of nonverbal aspects. As a result, people often miss important clues that could tell them more about the specific issue.

Understanding the distinction between high- and low-context communication provides a useful starting point, but the picture becomes clearer when we look at how these differences play out in specific communication styles. Scholars have identified four continua - direct/indirect, elaborate/understated, personal/contextual, and instrumental/affective - that further illustrate how cultures shape communication. Each continuum highlights a different way in which meaning is created and interpreted, showing us that context influences not only *what* is said but *how* it is expressed, who is responsible for clarity, and how relationships shape the exchange. By examining these dimensions, we can see more concretely how cultural preferences affect everyday interactions and the potential for misunderstanding across cultural boundaries.

Direct / Indirect

One of the most notable differences between high- and low-context cultures is whether the communication tends to be **direct** or **indirect.** In low-context cultures (like the U.S., Germany, Netherlands), communication tends to be direct - messages are explicit, task-focused, and the responsibility is on the speaker to be clear. Saying, “Close the window” leaves no doubt. Direct communication is efficient, clear, and task oriented. In high-context cultures (like Japan or Mexico), indirect messages are more common, with meaning hinted at rather than stated outright: “It feels chilly in here” may be understood as a polite request. Directness values clarity and efficiency, while indirectness values politeness, relationship harmony, and saving face.

These contrasting styles can cause misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. What feels efficient and straightforward to someone from a direct culture may come across as rude or overly blunt, while what feels polite and respectful to an indirect communicator may seem unclear or evasive. For instance, an American manager might interpret a Japanese employee’s nod and comment, “*That might be difficult,”* as agreement, when it is actually a subtle way to express disagreement. Recognizing these differences helps communicators interpret meaning, avoid conflict, and build intercultural relationships.

Elaborate / Understated

Another dimension that can be explored is **elaborated versus understated communication**. High-context cultures may use either depending on the situation. For example, Arab cultures often favor elaborated speech rich in metaphor and emotion, while East Asian cultures like Japan lean toward understatement, using silence and minimal expression to communicate respect and restraint. In low-context cultures, elaborated styles may appear in persuasive contexts, such as advertising or political speeches,

while understated styles are common in professional or conflict-avoidant situations where brevity and neutrality are valued.



Figure 5.3.2: In the US there have been conflicts between Korean store-keepers and African-American customers.

The conflicts in the elaborate / understated communication styles can occur from interactions among members of different ethnic groups. In one study of an immigrant Korean shopkeeper and an African-American customer in Los Angeles, the clash of styles is evident (Bailey, 1997). In a conversation Bailey analyzes, the African-American customer uses an elaborate style, featuring informal and emotional language, in an effort to establish a personal connection to the Korean shopkeeper. He uses swear words and volunteers personal information about himself. The shopkeeper, however, remains detached and impersonal, resulting in an unsatisfying conversation. This is not unusual in such encounters, as Bailey comments:

> The seeming avoidance of involvement on the part of immigrant Koreans is frequently seen by African Americans as the disdain and arrogance of racism. The relative stress on interpersonal involvement among African Americans in service encounters is typically perceived by immigrant Korean retailers as a sign of selfishness, interpersonal imposition, or poor breeding (Bailey, 1997, p. 353).

Personal / Contextual

The **personal versus contextual** dimension reflects how speakers position themselves in conversation. Low-context cultures typically emphasize personal communication, where people speak from their own perspective regardless of status or setting. For instance, a college student in the U.S. might say to their professor, “I disagree with that interpretation,” using first-person language asserting their viewpoint openly. High- context cultures, on the other hand, prefer contextual communication, adjusting speech based on social roles, relationships, and hierarchy. In this situation, a student from a high-context culture like Japan, might hesitate to openly disagree with a professor, instead using indirect language such as, “That’s an interesting point - I wonder if there might be another way to look at it.” The goal is to maintain harmony and show respect, especially in a hierarchical setting. Titles, honorifics, and formal speech are often used to signal awareness of social roles and relational boundaries. What feels respectful and appropriate in one culture may be perceived as overly assertive or evasive in another. Recognizing whether a culture leans toward personal or contextual communication helps to navigate conversations with greater sensitivity and effectiveness.

Instrumental / Affective

Finally, the **instrumental versus affective** dimension highlights the purpose of communication. Low-context cultures lean toward instrumental communication, which tends to be task-oriented and focused on achieving specific goals. For instance, a meeting in the U.S. or Germany might begin with a clear agenda. The manager says, “Let’s review last quarter’s numbers and finalize the marketing strategy by 3 p.m.” The tone is direct and the goal is specific. High context cultures tend to use affective communication, which emphasizes emotional resonance, relationship-building, and maintaining social harmony. In these contexts, the goal is not only to convey information to but nurture connection and mutual understanding. A similar meeting

in Japan or Mexico might begin with the manager inquiring about family members and small talk. Decisions might be made more slowly with attention given to maintaining group harmony. The goal of affective communication is not just to share information but to strengthen relationships and maintain social balance as well. In an intercultural setting, a task-focused speaker might seem cold or rushed to someone who values emotional connection, while an affective communicator may be seen as vague or ineffective by someone expecting directness. Understanding these dimensions can help avoid potential misunderstandings.

Variations in Context Rules of Communication Styles

While there are differences in the preferred communication styles used by various cultures, it is important to remember that no particular culture will use the same communication style all the time. It is helpful to think about these descriptors as a continuum rather than polar opposites because it allows us to imagine more communicative options for speakers. They are not fixed into one style or another but instead, people can make choices about where to be on the continuum according to the context in which they find themselves. When a person either emphasizes or minimizes the differences between himself /herself and the other person in conversation, it is called **code-switching**. In other words, it's the practice of shifting the language that you use to better express yourself in conversations. This can include, but is not limited to, language, accent, dialect, and vocalics or paralanguage.

There are many reasons why people may incorporate code-switching in their conversations. People, consciously and unconsciously, code-switch to better reflect the speech of those around them, such as picking up a southern accent when vacationing in Georgia. Sometimes people *code-switch* to ingratiate themselves to others. What teenager hasn't used the formal language of their parents when asking for a favor like borrowing the car or asking for money? Code-switching can also be used to express solidarity, gratitude, group identity, compliance gaining, or even to maintain the exact meaning of a word in a language that is not their own.

Cultural Close-up: Hybrid Languages in a Globalized World

When cultures and languages come into contact, they often blend to create hybrid forms of communication. These "mixed" languages, such as **Spanglish** (Spanish-English) and **Chinglish** (Chinese-English), are not random mistakes but instead reflect the creativity and adaptability of speakers navigating multilingual environments. Linguists argue that hybrid forms serve practical functions—bridging gaps in vocabulary, expressing cultural identity, and signaling group membership (Callahan, 2004).

For example, Spanglish is commonly heard among bilingual communities in the United States, particularly in areas with large Latinx populations. A speaker might switch between languages in the same sentence: *"Voy a parkear el carro and then we can go."* Similarly, Chinglish emerges in Chinese-English interactions and often appears in public signage or everyday speech: *"Add oil!"*—a literal translation of a Chinese expression encouraging perseverance (Li, 2016). While outsiders may view these hybrids as "incorrect," to speakers they represent dynamic, living languages that reflect real social and cultural experiences.

The evolution of hybrid languages highlights the ongoing flexibility of human communication. As globalization and migration increase, so too will the blending of languages. Scholars note that such language mixing challenges traditional ideas of linguistic purity and instead illustrates how identity, culture, and power are negotiated through everyday speech (García & Wei, 2014). Rather than dismissing these hybrids, it is important to recognize their role in shaping intercultural communication and the way they reflect the realities of multilingual societies.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think hybrid languages like Spanglish and Chinglish should be considered "legitimate" languages? Why or why not?
2. How might attitudes toward hybrid languages reflect broader cultural attitudes about immigration, identity, and belonging?
3. In what ways can hybrid languages serve as bridges in intercultural communication? In what ways might they create barriers?

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Interracial Communication

Race and communication are related in various ways. Racism influences our communication about race and is not an easy topic for most people to discuss. Today, people tend to view racism as overt acts such as calling someone a derogatory name or discriminating against someone in thought or action. However, there is a difference between racist acts, which we can attach to an individual, and institutional racism, which is not as easily identifiable. It is much easier for people to recognize and decry racist actions than it is to realize that racist patterns and practices go through societal institutions, which means that racism exists and doesn't have to be committed by any one person. As competent communicators and critical thinkers, we must challenge ourselves to be aware of how racism influences our communication at individual and societal levels.

We tend to make assumptions about people's race based on how they talk, and often these assumptions are based on stereotypes. Dominant groups tend to define what is correct or incorrect usage of a language, and since language is so closely tied to identity, labeling a group's use of a language as incorrect or deviant challenges or negates part of their identity (Yancy, 2011). We know there isn't only one way to speak English, but there have been movements to identify a standard. This becomes problematic when we realize that "standard English" refers to a way of speaking English that is based on white, middle-class ideals that do not match up with the experiences of many. When we create a standard for English, we can label anything that deviates from that "nonstandard English." Differences between standard English and what has been called "Black English" have gotten national attention through debates about whether or not instruction in classrooms should accommodate students who do not speak standard English. Education plays an important role in language acquisition, and class relates to access to education. In general, whether someone speaks standard English themselves or not, they tend to negatively judge people whose speech deviates from the standard.

Another national controversy has revolved around the inclusion of Spanish in common language use, such as Spanish as an option at ATMs, or other automated services, and Spanish language instruction in school for students who don't speak or are learning to speak English. As was noted earlier, the Latinx population in the United States is growing fast, which has necessitated inclusion of Spanish in many areas of public life. This has also created a backlash, which some scholars argue is tied more to the race of the immigrants than the language they speak and a fear that white America could be engulfed by other languages and cultures (Speicher, 2002). This backlash has led to a revived movement to make English the official language of the United States.



Figure 5.3.3: The "English only" movement of recent years is largely a backlash targeted at immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries.
Wikimedia Commons(opens in new window) – public domain. Courtesy of www.CGPGrey.com.(opens in new window)

The US Constitution does not stipulate a national language, and Congress has not designated one either. While nearly thirty states have passed English-language legislation, it has mostly been symbolic, and court rulings have limited any enforceability

(Zuckerman, 2010). The Linguistic Society of America points out that immigrants are very aware of the social and economic advantages of learning English and do not need to be forced. They also point out that the United States has always had many languages represented, that national unity hasn't rested on a single language, and that there are actually benefits to having a population that is multilingual (Linguistic Society of America, 2011). Interracial communication presents some additional verbal challenges.

Some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they will be negatively judged. Adopting the language practices of the dominant group may minimize perceived differences. This codeswitching creates a linguistic dual consciousness in which people are able to maintain their linguistic identities with their in-group peers but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in dominant society (Yancy, 2011). White people may also feel anxious about communicating with people of color out of fear of being perceived as racist. In other situations, people in dominant groups may spotlight nondominant members by asking them to comment on or educate others about their race (Allen, 2011). For example, I once taught at a university that was predominantly white. Students of color talked to me about being asked by professors to weigh in on an issue when discussions of race came up in the classroom. While a professor may have been well-intentioned, spotlighting can make a student feel conspicuous, frustrated, or defensive. Additionally, I bet the professors wouldn't think about asking a white, male, or heterosexual student to give the perspective of their whole group.

Attitudes Towards Speaking, Silence, and Writing

In some cultures, such as the United States, speech is highly valued, and it is important to be articulate and well-spoken in personal as well as public settings. People in these cultures tend to use language as a powerful tool to discover and express truth, as well as to extend themselves and have an impact on others. Such countries tend to take silence as a sign of indifference, indignation, objection, and even hostility. The silence confuses and confounds them since it is so different from expected behavior. Many are even embarrassed by silence, and feel compelled to fill the silence with words so they are no longer uncomfortable. Or if a question is not answered immediately, people are concerned that the speaker may think that they do not know the answer. Countries reflecting these attitudes would include the United States, Canada, Italy, and other Western European countries.

Silence in some Asian cultures can be a sign of respect. If a person asks a question, it is polite to demonstrate that you have reflected on the question before providing an answer. In differences of opinion, it is often thought that saying nothing is better than offending the other side, which would cause both parties to lose face. Sometimes words do not convey ideas, but instead become barriers. In his ethnographic study of the Western Apache Native American tribe, Keith Basso (1970) reported that silence was used for "unscripted" social situations, such as unforeseen encounters, talking with strangers, first dates, times of mourning, or greeting those who had been away for an extended period of time. Later, Charles Braithwaite (1999) expanded the study of the role of silence to a variety of cultures, in which silence tends to be part of the communicative pattern. He confirmed Basso's findings that silence is seen in communication situations in which there is uncertainty, ambiguity, or unpredictability. He also found that silence is often used in conversations in which the participants represent different positions of power or authority. In hierarchical cultures, speaking is often the right of the most senior or oldest person so others are expected to remain silent or only speak when spoken to and asked to corroborate information. In listening cultures, silence is a way to keep exchanges calm and orderly. In collectivistic cultures, it is polite to remain silent when your opinion does not agree with that of the group. In some African and Native American cultures, silence is seen as a way of enjoying someone's company without a need to fill every moment with noise. Or silence could simply be a case of the person having to speak in another language, and taking their time to reply.

The act of writing also varies widely in value from culture to culture. In the United States written contracts are considered more powerful and binding than oral consent. A common question is "did you get that in writing?" The relationship between writing and speaking is an important reinforcement of commitment. Other cultures tend to value oral communication over written communication or even a handshake over words.

Conclusion

In exploring verbal processes in intercultural communication, this chapter has highlighted how language both reflects and shapes cultural identity, thought, and interaction. From the structure and evolution of language to the nuances of communication styles, such as high- and low-context, we see that words are never neutral. They carry cultural assumptions, social meanings, and emotional weight. As globalization, migration, and multilingualism continue to reshape our communicative landscape, developing linguistic awareness and cultural sensitivity becomes essential. Competent intercultural communicators not only understand what is being said, but also how and why it is said - bridging differences with empathy, clarity, and respect.

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5.4: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills and Verbal Exchanges

Verbal Strategies for Intercultural Communication

Effective and appropriate communication isn't always easy—even when everyone in the conversation speaks the same language. Differences in grammar, vocabulary, slang, and cultural expectations can quickly lead to misunderstandings. When you add actual language differences into the mix, the potential for confusion grows even more.

The strategies below offer practical tools to help you navigate moments when you're communicating across languages, as well as situations where everyone is technically speaking the same language but cultural respect and clarity still matter. These tips can help you communicate with greater confidence, empathy, and awareness.

1. Master the "Slow and Low" Tempo

Pace is often the biggest barrier to comprehension. Even when you are under pressure, consciously slow down your speech and enunciate clearly. Rushing through a conversation to save time often backfires, leading to misunderstandings that require even more time to correct later.

2. Standardize Your Vocabulary

Avoid culture-specific idioms and metaphors that require "insider" knowledge. Phrases like "ballpark figure" or "let the cat out of the bag" may be common in the U.S., but they can be nonsensical to others. Use direct, literal language to ensure your message is accessible to everyone.

3. De-Code Jargon and Acronyms

Education and professional environments are often filled with TLAs (Three Letter Abbreviations--GPA, FBI, UPS, NBA) and specialized jargon. If you must use technical terms, define them immediately or provide a written guide. This prevents others from feeling excluded and helps build a shared professional language.

4. Practice Reflective Verification

Never assume a "yes" means "I understand." Use reflective listening—starting sentences with "*So, what I hear you saying is...*"—to verify your own understanding. To check theirs, avoid "yes/no" questions like "*Is that clear?*" Instead, use open-ended prompts like, "*What is your understanding of our next steps?*"

5. Commit to removing biased language from your conversations.

Biased language—whether meant as a joke or said in frustration—reinforces stereotypes and can harm the people it targets. Even seemingly "small" comments can chip away at someone's sense of belonging and contribute to a climate where more serious forms of prejudice take root. Competent intercultural communicators stay informed about respectful, up-to-date language and make a conscious effort to remove words or phrases that demean individuals or groups.

6. Specify Deadlines and Expectations

Ambiguity is the enemy of intercultural productivity. Replace vague phrases like "*get back to me shortly*" with concrete details: "*Please email the report by 5:00 PM EST on Wednesday, February 21.*" Clear parameters reduce anxiety and ensure alignment across time zones and work styles.

7. Multi-Channel Reinforcement

If possible, provide information through more than one medium. Follow up conversations with text messages or emails to allow non-native speakers the time to process information at their own pace.

8. Adopt the "Language of Respect"

Small linguistic efforts yield significant relational dividends. Learn key greetings and phrases in the local language of your friends or hosts. For example, if you are traveling to a different country, learn key phrases in advance, such as "hello", "how are you?", "Can you help me?", and "Do you speak English?" Countries around the world often find Americans to be "rude" because of our lack of local language knowledge. If you are visiting France, taking the same to learn to say hello and ask for help in French can go a long way. *Bonjour. Pardon. Excusez-moi. Pouvez-vous m'aider.*

9. Understand Sapir-Whorf Patience

According to the **Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis**, the language we speak shapes how we perceive the world. Recognizing this helps us remain patient, as intercultural communication is not just about translating words, but bridging different ways of thinking. Give yourself and others the extra time required for this mental "re-mapping."

10. Consider Translation Tools

Living in the age of AI technology provides intercultural communicators with great opportunities to bridge language differences. Consider using language translation apps to help with their are significant language barriers. These tools can be lifesavers, especially if you travel to a country with a different writing system, such as Japan and Kanji, and Russia and Cyrillic.

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5.5: Conclusion

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the powerful relationship between language and culture, showing how the words we choose—and the meanings we attach to them—shape our interactions across cultural contexts. It began by examining how language functions as both a system of symbols and a cultural tool. Students learned that meanings are not universal: denotative definitions may be shared, but connotative meanings vary widely across communities. The chapter also highlighted how misunderstandings often arise from literal interpretations, and how the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis invites us to consider the ways language influences thought, perception, and worldview.

Building on this foundation, the chapter turned to the realities of **moving between languages** in a globalized world. It emphasized that multilingualism is far more common than monolingualism and explored how migration, social media, and global mobility shape linguistic identities. Students were introduced to Second Language Acquisition theories—particularly sociocognitive approaches that highlight the importance of context, interaction, and pragmatic competence. The chapter also addressed the global spread of English, noting both its practical advantages and its potential to overshadow or endanger other languages.

The chapter then examined **variations in communication styles**, illustrating how cultural norms influence not just what we say, but how we say it. High-context and low-context communication were contrasted, revealing differences in directness, relational expectations, and reliance on shared knowledge. The chapter also explored the communicative meaning of silence, distinctions between task-oriented and affective styles, and the ways social hierarchies shape conversational patterns.

Finally, the chapter concluded with a **Toolkit for Verbal Communication**, offering practical strategies for navigating intercultural conversations with clarity, curiosity, and respect. Together, these sections underscore that language is far more than a set of words—it is a living, evolving expression of culture, identity, and human connection.

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6: NONVERBAL PROCESSES AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Learning Objectives

- Define nonverbal communication and examine the impact of culture
- Identify the principles of nonverbal communication
- Describe the unique characteristics of nonverbal communication across cultures
- Compare and contrast types of nonverbal communication related to body language and personal preference
- Understand spatial, temporal, and environmental types of nonverbal communication
- Explain Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory
- Identify guidelines for appropriate and effective nonverbal communication in diverse encounters

6.1: Principles of Nonverbal Communication

6.2: Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

6.3: Body Language and Personal Presence

6.4: Spatial, Temporal, and Environmental Signals

6.5: Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory

6.6: Growing Your Nonverbal Intercultural Communication Skills

6.7: Conclusion

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6.1: Principles of Nonverbal Communication

In 2015, the "Boston bomber", Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, was sentenced to death. He and his brother had placed bombs near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries. At the trial, his involvement in setting the bombs was not at issue; he admitted his guilt. The question was if he would be sentenced to life in prison or to death. That decision rested with the jury and their perception of Tsarnaev. Character witnesses, family members, and bombing survivors testified. The defense tried to make the case that he was acting under the controlling influence of his older brother. The prosecution portrayed him as a heartless terrorist. A key factor for the jury was to evaluate Tsarnaev's character. His body language during the trial was not helpful to the defense. He seemed uninvolved and bored. He showed no emotional reaction to the horrific scenes and stories from the bombing shown and narrated in court. He didn't look at the jury or make eye contact with those on the witness stand. In mainstream US culture, an averted gaze could be interpreted as an admission of guilt and shame, while the lack of emotional response points to an absence of remorse. The jury was also shown a picture from a surveillance camera in jail in which Tsarnaev held up his middle finger in a gesture of defiance and hostility. The jury also was given the text of tweets Tsarnaev had sent, as well as the anti-US manifesto he had written on the side of the boat where he was captured. The messages no doubt condemned him in the eyes of the jury, but certainly his bearing in court contributed to the jury's ultimate decision. Nonverbal signals rarely decide life or death, but they do play a central role in human communication. In this chapter, we will explore how the role of culture and nonverbal communication in the communication process.



Figure 6.1.1: Tsarnaev, from a jail surveillance camera

This chapter is organized into four parts. First, we overview the principles of nonverbal communication. Second, examine the different types of nonverbal communication. Third, we look at the role of time and space as forms of nonverbal communication. Last, we wrap up the chapter by looking at common nonverbal communication challenges as well as actionable steps for improvement.

Understanding nonverbal communication is essential for anyone who wants to connect more effectively with others. It plays a powerful role in how we interact and build relationships. Here's why:

- **It shapes how we present ourselves.** From posture to facial expressions to clothing, our nonverbal signals help others form impressions of who we are—even before we speak.
- **It influences how we see others.** We often make judgments based on someone's body language, eye contact, or tone of voice, sometimes without even realizing it.
- **It reflects our emotions.** Whether we're excited, nervous, frustrated, or joyful, our feelings often shine through in ways words can't fully capture.
- **It can strengthen—or weaken—our message.** Nonverbal cues like gestures and vocal tone can reinforce what we're saying, or they can send mixed signals that confuse the listener.

- **It's key to better relationships.** Being aware of nonverbal communication helps us listen more deeply, respond more thoughtfully, and build trust with others.
- **It's shaped by culture.** Different cultures have unique rules and expectations for nonverbal behavior—like how much eye contact is appropriate, what gestures mean, or how emotions are expressed. Understanding these differences helps us avoid misunderstandings and communicate more respectfully across cultures

Principles of Nonverbal Communication

According to Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), **nonverbal communication** is the "message exchange process involving the use of nonlinguistic and paralinguistic cues that are expressed through multiple communication channels in a particular sociocultural setting" (p. 132). In other words, **nonverbal communication** is how we send and receive messages without using words. It includes things like facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and even how close we stand to someone. These signals can mean different things depending on the culture or situation we're in. Let's break down the key terms from the definition above:

- **Nonlinguistic cues** may include nonverbal behaviors like eye contact, the expressions on your face, whether you use touch (like a handshake or pat on the back), the way you move your hands when you speak, and how you carry yourself or sit—all of which can send messages without saying a word.
- **Paralinguistic cues** may include the sounds and style that go along with what you're saying—like how loud or soft the volume of your voice is, how high or low it sounds, and the emotional tone behind your words (whether you're being serious, sarcastic, excited, etc.).
- **Sociocultural setting** highlights how the culture you're in, including its values, traditions, and social expectation, affects what people see as appropriate or inappropriate nonverbal behavior. In other words, the way you use gestures, eye contact, or personal space might be totally fine in one culture but considered rude or confusing in another.

To better understand how aspects of nonverbal communication may play out across cultures, check out Table 6.1.1 below for a side-by-side look at how expectations for nonlinguistic and paralinguistic cues can vary in the classroom for college students in the U.S. and China.

Table 6.1.1: Nonverbal Communication on Campus and It's Cultural Differences

Nonverbal Communication on Campus and Cultural Differences

Aspect	American College Students	Chines
Nonverbal Behaviors	Eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions are used freely	More re
Paralanguage	A varied tone shows enthusiasm or emphasis	A softe
Classroom Behavior	Casual posture, students may sit informally or speak freely	Formal
Instructor Interaction	Informal greetings	Expecte
Office Visits	Knock and wait for permission before entering	Foreign
Late Arrival	Enter quietly without explanation	Traditio
Leaving Early	May leave without notifying the teacher	Expecte

Aspect	American College Students	Chines
Physical Contact	Avoids teacher touching; prefers personal space	Teache

Source: Adapted from Li, D., & Yang, M. (2020, July). Non-Verbal Communication on Campus and Its Cultural Differences. In *2020 International Conference on Language, Art and Cultural Exchange*

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6.2: Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

Now that you have a basic understanding of nonverbal communication, we hope you are curious to learn more about the functions and types of nonverbal behaviors. In this section we will explore the unique characteristics of nonverbal communication as a channel in the communication process. It is likely that most individuals would be surprised to learn how important nonverbal behavior is in conveying messages during conversations. The common perception is that what we are mostly paying attention to are the words being said. We tend to be unaware of the many other factors that can impact the nature of a verbal interaction. The relative importance of nonverbal codes varies with context and culture, but some estimates of what weight is conveyed by nonverbal versus verbal means gives a much higher percentage to nonverbal. Albert Mehrabian (1971) asserted that we develop our attitude towards the other person (like or dislike) overwhelmingly through nonverbal means. In fact, he claimed that up to 93% of that process happens nonverbally, through vocal tone and gestures (38% and 55% respectively), rather than through the literal meaning of the words (7%). More recent studies have indicated that determining the impact of nonverbal elements on communication meaning is extremely difficult, and results can vary from 60-93%. In the bigger picture, the exact results don't matter as much as the fact that nonverbal communication can contribute to well-over half of the emotional or relational meaning of any given message.



Figure 6.2.1: Sometimes words are not needed, as the body language here shows

Nonverbal communication is crucial to the study of intercultural communication as nonverbal elements can take many different forms and can vary significantly in its manifestations and usage across cultures. You might have studied a second language for many years, and considered yourself fluent, but still find it difficult to communicate with others when you travel to a country where that second language is spoken. Most of us have to live within a culture before we learn the nonverbal communication aspects of culture. Learning nonverbal communication is important and challenging. It's important because much communication meaning is conveyed nonverbally, and challenging because nonverbal communication is often multi-channeled and culture-specific. The important role that nonverbals play in communicating across cultures is demonstrated in the fact that the study of intercultural communication originated with investigations into the "**silent language**" and "**hidden dimensions**" of time and space in communication (titles of seminal books by Edward Hall, 1959, 1966).



Figure 6.2.2: Two rock climbers who speak different languages communicate non-verbally.

Nonverbal Communication Uses Multiple Channels

When we use verbal communication, we use words, and we transmit through one channel at a time. We can speak words, read words, type words, or listen to words, but the channel is verbal and words. Nonverbally, when I talk to a friend, I listen to my friend's tone of voice, I watch my friend's facial expressions, use of eye contact, and gestures, and possibly touch them (multiple channels) all while trying to make sense of the words (one channel). Nonverbal signals also come through the presence (or absence) of personal objects or artifacts. Those may be articles of clothing, jewelry or accessories we wear or hold, or might be physical items surrounding us. Signals may be sent by more intangible means such as smell or sound. There may be a complex array of nonverbal factors at play, as in this example of nonverbal behavior at a military checkpoint:

> A Sunni driver coming up to a security post he believes is under Shia control should not only have the right ID to hand, but should also push in a tape playing Shia religious songs and turn up the volume. He should hang a picture of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and the most revered figure in the Shia faith, from the rear-view mirror. He might also slip on the large silver ring worn only by Shias, especially those considered to be descendants of the Prophet, and perhaps carry a "torba", the round piece of clay that Shias often place on their foreheads when they bow down in prayer. These and other handy tips are given on the Iraqi Rabita website, designed to advise Sunnis on how to get through Shia checkpoints (Checkpoints, 2007).

The situation is not likely one most of us will ever encounter, but it dramatizes the importance of nonverbal codes in particular contexts. In such situations, nonverbals can play a significant role in easing tensions. On the other hand, inappropriate nonverbal behavior can easily have the opposite effect, exacerbating potential tensions and causing open conflict.

Nonverbal Communication is More Ambiguous

Unlike most verbal communication, nonverbal communication and its meanings are primarily learned unconsciously. A smile can express friendliness, comfort, nervousness, and sarcasm, just as catching someone's eye can convey intimacy, humor, or a challenge, depending on the situation. This ambiguity can pose difficulties for the interpretation of messages—especially across cultural boundaries. Chances are you have had many experiences where words were misunderstood, or where the meaning of words was unclear. When it comes to nonverbal communication, meaning is even harder to discern. You likely have had experiences where your nonverbal communication, such as a facial expression was misunderstood. We can sometimes tell what people are communicating through their nonverbal communication, but there is no foolproof "dictionary" of how to interpret nonverbal messages.

Nonverbal Communication Has Fewer Rules

One reason that nonverbal communication is more ambiguous than verbal communication is because it is governed by fewer rules—and most of those will be informal norms. Verbal communication has literally thousands of rules governing grammar, spelling, pronunciation, usage, meaning, and more. Yes, your parents might tell you to "it's not polite to stare at people," but most of these declarations are considered models of good behavior and not something that dictates the meaning of a communication act.

Popular culture is filled with references to "body language" and promises that you can read your boss/lover/parent/friend like a book by the end of the article/tweet/video. Because nonverbal communication is ambiguous, has fewer rules, and co-creates meaning with verbal communication, it would be impossible to teach a universal shorthand for interpreting how individuals express attitudes and emotions through their bodies. There is not a universal code used that could be considered as a "language of the body" with conventionalized meanings which equate to the components that constitute spoken language (Haller & Peeters, retrieved 2/13/19).

Nonverbal Messages Communicate Emotions and Meaning

Nonverbal communication often gives our thoughts and feelings away before we are even aware of what we are thinking or how we feel. People may see and hear more than you ever anticipated. Your nonverbal communication includes both intentional and unintentional messages, but since it all happens so fast, the *unintentional* ones can contradict what you know you are supposed to say or how you are supposed to react. Our reliance on nonverbal communication becomes even more intense when people display mixed messages or verbal and nonverbal behaviors that convey contradictory meanings (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). In such cases, we almost always trust the nonverbal message over the verbal one as nonverbal behavior is seen as more honest and revealing in that it is often instinctive and unconscious. Still, we often assign intentional motives to nonverbal communication when in fact their meaning is unintentional, and hard to interpret.

Another way that nonverbal communication can communicate meaning is through status and power. Touch, posture, gestures, use of space and territory, are good indicators of how power is distributed in the relationship, and the perks that status brings. If you go into a large corporate office you may find that the corner office is occupied by the senior manager, the size of the office being related to the power of the individual within the organization. And although research indicates that deceptive behaviors are idiosyncratic to particular individual people, the interplay between verbal and nonverbal communication can help receivers determine deception.

Nonverbal Communication is Influenced by Culture

The close bond between culture and nonverbal communication makes true intercultural communication difficult to master. Yes, some cues can be learned, but because nonverbal is ambiguous and has fewer rules, it takes most people many years of immersion within a culture before they can fully understand the subtle meanings encompassed within that culture's nonverbal communication (Chen & Starosta, 2005).

In a 2009 meeting with the emperor of Japan, then president Barak Obama, bowed rather deeply in greeting. US conservative commentators called the bow 'treasonous' while former vice-president, Dick Cheney, believed that "there was no reason for an American president to bow to anyone" (Slate, retrieved 3/8/19). The Japanese press, on the other hand, acknowledged the bow as a sign of respect, but believed the 45 degree bend or 'seikeirei' bow to be much more exaggerated than it needed to be.

Nonverbal and Verbal Communication Work Together to Create Communication

Often nonverbal communication accompanies speech. In such cases, the relationship between the two can vary. Body language can reinforce or emphasize the verbal message – smiling, for example, while complementing someone. Gestures can also substitute for speech – nodding or shaking the head for yes or no. On occasion, nonverbal gestures might repeat verbal messages, as in giving directions, through pointing to the way to go. Sometimes, a person's nonverbal message might contradict what is said. A person appearing downcast might respond "Oh, nothing," in response to the question "What's the matter?", but the body language may send a different signal. In such situations, the nonverbal action is likely to be perceived as the authentic message, not the stock verbal response.

Despite the differences between verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, and the importance of nonverbal noted by Mehrabian and others, both forms are essential. They both work together to create meaning (Jones & LeBaron, 2002). As communicators, we do not experience or express them separately, but rather jointly to create meaning (Birdwhistell, 1973). We need *both* to communicate competently.

Contributions and Attributions

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6.3: Body Language and Personal Presence



Figure 6.3.1: How to Decode Nonverbal Communication. Image generated by Google Gemini

Before we say a single word, our bodies are already speaking. The way you smile, gesture, shift your posture, or make eye contact—all of it sends messages that others interpret, often instantly. In this section, we'll explore how *kinesics* (body movement), *haptics* (touch), and *oculesics* (eye behavior) shape our face-to-face interactions. These nonverbal cues help us express emotions, build trust, and navigate social norms—sometimes more powerfully than words ever could. One reason that nonverbal communication is so rich with information is that humans use so many different aspects of behavior, appearance, and environment to convey meaning. These types of nonverbal communication can vary considerably across cultures. Every culture interprets posture, gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, vocal noises, use of space, degree of territory, and time differently. Scholars call the different means used for transmitting information **nonverbal communication codes** (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002).

Kinesics

The word kinesics comes from the root word kinesis, which means "movement," and refers to the study of hand, arm, body, and face movements. It is thought by some to be the richest nonverbal code in terms of its power to communicate meaning. When you hear people refer to body language, they are likely referencing kinesics. Specifically, this section will outline the use of gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and posture as kinetic forms of nonverbal communication.

Gestures: Emblems, Illustrators, Regulators, Adaptors

One of the most common forms of kinesics are gestures, a culturally-specific form of nonverbal communication involving body movements, usually involving the hands and arms. The first type of gesture is known as an **emblem**, a body movement that replaces a specific word or phrase. **Greeting rituals** involve greetings and departures, which have practices that are largely nonverbal, such as shaking hands or waving and they tend to vary across cultures. In Japan, for example, it is common to bow when greeting someone, with the nature of the bow (how deep and how long) being determined by the nature of the occasion and social connection of the persons involved. In some cultures, kissing on the cheek is the usual greeting, although how many times the kisses are exchanged and which sexes are included can vary. In other parts of the world there may be hugs and kisses, depending on the context and relationship. In Arab countries it is common to bow and touch the forehead and chest (the *salaam*) when meeting someone. The *Wai* is used in Thailand and in other Asian cultures, consisting of a bow with the palms pressed together. In other cultures, people rub noses, such as in the *hongi*, a traditional greeting of the Maori people in New Zealand. Knowledge of such rituals can be helpful in avoiding awkwardness in first encounters.



Figure 6.3.2: The bow is common in Japan as a greeting and is used in other contexts, such as apologies.



Figure 6.3.3: David Beckham receives a *hongi*

A second type of gesture is an **illustrator.** Illustrators are nonverbal gestures that accompany and enhance a verbal message, but unlike emblems, they do not replace a word or phrase. Illustrators are usually closely linked to what is being said and they are used to help clarify the verbal message, show the connection between the speaker and message, emphasize or reinforce the message and to direct the flow of the conversation (Samman, et al, 2009). Perceptions of illustrators vary greatly across cultures. In the United States, if you find that you use your hands while you speak, people may say you "talk with your hands". Countries such as Italy are known to use a lot of gestures, and to gesture frequently and widely while speaking, as opposed to Asian cultures which may find an over-reliance on hand gestures to be rude and distracting.

A third type of gesture is known as a **regulator,** a type of body movement that helps guide the flow of conversations. **Regulators** can be use to initiate, maintain, or even wrap up a conversation. To illustrate, in the United States, it is common to nod our heads up and down to indicate agreemen, and to shake our heads left to right to indicate that we disagree. However, this culturally learned behavior varies across cultures. In India, people nod their heads up and down and bobble, a tilt from side to side, to indicate agreement or politeness. Alternatively, in Bulgaria, they are completely reversed from US practices, shaking their heads left to right to indicate agreement, and up and down to indicate disagreement. In the United States, several nonverbal regulators are commonly used to manage conversational flow and signal turn-taking. These include raising one's hand to indicate a desire

to speak, holding the palm outward to suggest that one is not yet finished speaking or wishes to prevent interruption, and subtly raising the index finger—often with a repeated upward motion—to signal an intent to contribute or interject. In Germany, locals will often practice the a pinecone gesture (fingertips together, palm up, rocking wrist) to express confusion or request clarification.

Cultural Close-Up

One of the richest array of gestures are for communicating insults and obscenities. ***Insult gestures*** *tend to vary across cultures and are different as well in the extent to which they are used. In Greece, for example, the moutza (μούτζα) is a commonly seen insult gesture. It consists of spreading the fingers (one hand or both) and trusting them outwards, towards the other person (as if flinging something unpleasant). Other gestures may convey skepticism or disbelief, such as the French mon oeil (my eye), using a finger to pull down the lower eyelid. The gesture is also used in Japan, known as the Akanbe (あかんべえ).*





Figure 6.3.4: Moutza against the parliament by Greek protesters Figure 6.3.5: Akanbe gesture in Japan

The caution in using gestures extends to those which may be widespread in a culture, and which we may interpret as universal. The North American A-OK sign (circled thumb and pointer finger, with the other fingers spread out) is an obscene gesture in many European cultures. Likewise, the inverted peace sign – two fingers facing inwards is an insult in England and Australia. The thumbs-up gesture signals in North America well done; in Greece and other countries, it is equivalent to the insulting "Up yours!" (Cotton, 2013). US President George W. Bush famously used the hook 'em horns gesture of the Texas Longhorn football team to signal his approval of the marching band of the University of Texas. In Italy, that gesture is well-known, but it doesn't signal fan enthusiasm or let's rock. It is called il cornuto, indicating that the other person is a cuckold, that is, that his wife is cheating on him (Cotton, 2013).





Figure 6.3.6: Thumbs-up may be an insult Figure 6.3.7: US President George Bush

The final type of gesture is known as an **adaptor**, a subconscious movement we use to regulate internal and external experiences such as stress, anxiety, boredom, or discomfort. Adaptors come in two forms: self-adaptors and object-adaptors. Self-adaptors

involve manipulating parts of your own body, like twisting your hair, cracking your knuckles, or biting your nails. Object-adaptors, on the other hand, involve interacting with external items, such as playing with a piece of jewelry, twirling a pencil between your fingers, or tapping away on your cellphone. When my daughter was a toddler, her favorite object was a baby blanket she affectionately named “B.” B was her constant companion—essential for naps, bedtime, and even visits to Disneyland. Adaptors, whether self- or object-oriented, can be important tools for regulating our emotions and bringing us comfort when needed.

Affect displays refer to the use of facial expressions and body movement to communicate an endless stream of emotions, and we make judgments about what others are feeling by assessing their faces. Our use of emoticons to communicate attitudes and emotions in electronic media testifies to the importance of this type of kinesics. It is often claimed that facial expressions tend to be universal, the idea being that expressing basic emotions is an elemental, instinctive behavior common to all humans. This idea goes back to Charles Darwin (1872) who claimed all humans express emotion in the same way. This was later contradicted by anthropologists such as Margaret Mead (1975). It wasn't until the 1960s that so-called "universality studies" were conducted by Paul Ekman and others. In a series of experiments involving participants from a variety of cultures, they showed that there were six universal expressions — anger, disgust, fear, sadness, happiness, and surprise (Ekman, 1972). Later, a seventh expression, contempt, was added (Ekman & Heider, 1988). As the studies involved people from industrialized countries, who may have learned to interpret faces from mass media, other studies were conducted among tribal groups in New Guinea, which came to similar results (Ekman & Friesen, 1971). An interesting experiment conducted with blind athletes produced the same results as their sighted colleagues (Matsumoto & Willingham, 2009). Because the blind athletes could not have learned the behaviors, one can assume there is an innate capacity to display facial expressions.



Figure 6.3.8: Joy is expressed the same across cultures

What causes particular emotions and determines their intensity can be quite different, both personally and culturally. Ekman and Friesen (1969) coined the term **cultural display rules** to describe such cultural differences in facial expressions. Consider the smile: People in all cultures have the ability to smile, but cultures value and interpret smiles in different ways. In other words, the meaning behind a smile is not universal. For example, in Russian, people do not smile because it implies that you are foolish, or possibly sneaky and manipulative. Even in family photos, adults often appear with flat or scowling faces. Many Latin American cultures prefer a proud and elegant facial appearance, which does not include smiling. In Japan, smiling is a way to show respect or to hide what you are actually feeling. In the United States, we smile to show a pleasant face to the people around us, to express happiness and gratitude. We often tend to smile for the purposes of getting along with others (Solomon, 2017). Some cultures tend to be much more expressive and rich in their use of facial expressions than others. Italians and Mediterraneans in general are normally placed in that category, while northern Europeans and Asians are seen as more restrained.

Spotlight on Social Media

In her 2024 article *Social Media and Its Impact on Nonverbal Communication*, Assistant Professor Alveena Wajahat explores how digital platforms are changing the way people express and interpret nonverbal cues. Traditionally conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and body language, nonverbal communication now competes with emojis, memes, and text messaging. Wajahat highlights both the challenges and opportunities of this shift, noting that while tools like video calls and visual content can enhance emotional expression, the absence or distortion of authentic nonverbal signals can hinder empathy and trust, making it harder to develop emotional connection. She also explores how different platforms—such as TikTok, LinkedIn, and Reddit—foster unique communication norms, which vary across cultures and influence how users perceive and relate to one another. With TikTok, users from different parts of the world share content and interact with one another. Content developers from different countries copy facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements from other content creators, creating a global nonverbal vocabulary. Consider a dance trend that starts in South Korea might be mirrored by fans in Brazil, Nigeria, and the U.S. within days. These evolving patterns not only affect interpersonal relationships but also shape broader societal norms around emotional expression, identity, and connection in an increasingly digital and globalized world. Read more here, in the International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research.

As you reflect on this reading, consider the following questions:

1. How has your use of social media influenced the way you interpret nonverbal cues from people in other cultures?
2. In what ways do you think emojis or curated images help—or hinder—authentic emotional expression across cultural boundaries?
3. Have you ever experienced a misunderstanding online that you believe would not have occurred in a face-to-face setting? What role did nonverbal communication play?

Codes of general conduct, politeness, or social harmony may influence the public display of emotions. This was shown in a crosscultural experiment (Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989), which studied facial expressions of Japanese and US students while watching emotionally disturbing films. When both groups of young people were among themselves, they showed the same expressions. However, when the Japanese students were with an older, male observer, they displayed neutral expressions or even smiled, while the US students continued to display the same negative emotions. These cultural display rules explain the difference in expressions of the Japanese students in the experiment, as due to the cultural mandate in Japan of managing and minimizing expressions of feelings in the presence of a third party. In Japan it is culturally appropriate to hide unhappiness by smiling or embarrassment by laughing. While weeping in public is considered in Japan to be inappropriate, in Middle Eastern or Latin American cultures it is normal to express one's emotions openly and visibly.

Using the concept of cultural display rules, Matsumoto (1990) developed a theory of the expression of emotions that incorporates Hofstede's taxonomies, particularly as they relate to individualism versus collectivism. According to the theory, because individualistic cultures encourage and reward self-expression, individuals in those cultures are free to express fully and instinctively their feelings, whether they be positive or negative. On the other hand, those in collectivistic cultures are bound by conventions of the collective good and social harmony to regulate their expression of emotion when not alone. Matsumoto also incorporates the concept of power distance:

Large power-distance cultures endorse displays of emotion that reinforce hierarchical relations (i.e., status reminders), such as showing anger toward a low-status person or appeasing a high-status person (e.g., smiling). Small power-distance cultures embrace egalitarian values and teach the importance of treating people as equals. Thus, there is less pressure in these cultures for members to adjust displays of emotion according to the status of another person. (Remland et al., 2014)

Large power distance cultures tend tend to be correlated with collectivism, just as small power distance cultures are correlated with individualism. As always, in such broad-stroke generalizations, caution is needed in applying these labels to individuals. While dominant cultural forces may be powerful, they may be contradicted and potentially negated by values associated with group membership, whether those be ethnic, regional, or other. It is also the case that individual personalities play a significant role in the degree to which emotions are displayed or suppressed. The patterns we've identified in nonverbal behavior should be seen as examples not as absolutes. Being aware of such potential variations can be helpful in adjusting expectations and suspending judgments.

Oculesics

Eye contact, *or* **Oculesics**, serves many purposes. We use our eyes to express emotions, regulate a conversation, indicate listening behavior, show interest in others, respect, status, hostility, and aggression (Burgoon, Buller & Woodall, 1996). Patterns of eye contact vary significantly by culture. Generally, eye contact is considered a positive behavior in the United States. It can mean that you are interested, confident, and bold (a good thing), but people often avoid eye contact in crowded, impersonal situations such as walking down a busy street or riding a crowded bus. In France, however, someone may feel free to watch someone interesting on the street and consciously make eye contact to indicate interest. In the Middle East, direct eye contact with strangers is less common and generally less appropriate, whereas lack of eye contact in Asia is often a sign of respect and considered polite. Within the US, different ethnic groups have been found to follow different norms in the use of eye contact to regulate conversations. African-Americans maintain eye contact when speaking but avert their gaze when listening, but just the opposite is true for European Americans (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978). This distinction can lead to conflict:

Interethnic expectancy violations exist when African Americans expect the European Americans to look them in the eyes when speaking but instead receive "nonresponsiveness" or "indifference" cues. European Americans, on the other hand, may view the direct eye gaze during speaking as "confrontational" or "aggressive" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p.126).

In both pluralistic societies and in cross-cultural encounters, being mindful of variations in this area is important. Nora Dresser's book, *Multicultural Matters* (2005), chronicles how Korean-American shopkeepers, who did not make eye contact with their customers, were perceived as disrespectful, something contributing to the open confrontation taking place in US urban centers between some Asians and African-Americans. In some contexts in the US, such as in urban areas among teens and young adults, looking directly at someone can be seen as a provocation, reflected in the term "mad-dogging" (Remland et al., 2015).



Figure 6.3.9: Groups may have different expectations in maintaining eye contact in conversations

Posture

Posture is the last item in our list of kinesics**.** Humans can stand up straight or slouch, lean forward or backward, round or slump our shoulders, and tilt our heads. Mehrabian (1972) believed that posture communicates immediacy and power. Immediacy is the degree to which you find someone interesting and attractive. Typically, when someone from the United States finds someone attractive, they face the person when talking, hold their head up, and lean in. Whereas a reaction to someone they don't like might have them look away and lean back. Power is the ability to influence people or events. In the United States, high-status communicators typically use relaxed postures (Burgoon et al., 1996), but in Japan, the opposite is true. Japanese display power

through erect posture with feel planted firmly on the floor.

Paralanguage

Vocal characteristics we use to communicate nonverbal messages are called **vocalics** or **paralanguage** (with-language)**.** Paralanguage involves verbal and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning, including rate, pitch, tone, volume, intensity, pausing, and even silence. Tone and intonation can have a determining effect on the message conveyed, turning a statement, for example, into a sarcastic comment. The volume, fluency, or rhythm of speech can transmit to the listener information such as degree of confidence, nervousness, or even perceived trustworthiness of the speaker. The voice qualities of a speaker can be as important in conveying a message as the semantic value of the words spoken. Scholars who engage in conversation analysis have shown even slight modifications in voice tone or intonation can send a message to the listener.

One of the roles vocalizations play is to function as a **back-channel** or filler in conversations, a way for a listener to send messages to the speaker (Yngve, 1970). This may consist in English sounds such as "uh-huh" or "hmm", or words and phrases like "yes" or "go on". Back-channel responses play different roles; they may encourage the speaker to continue, indicate the extent of interest, or assess the speaker's statements, i.e., agreeing ("Right") or expressing doubt ("Do you really think so?"). There may be more than simple words or phrases involved, namely longer utterances completing the speaker's sentences, requesting clarification, or attempting to take the floor. Back-channel communication occurs across cultures, but may vary in norms and expectations, which can cause confusion or awkwardness. Check out Table 6.3.1 to explore different bach-channel or fillers across different cultures and languages.

Table 6.3.1 Cultural Fillers From Around the World

Cultural Fillers from Around the World

Country / Region	Word / Phrase	Meaning / Usage
France	*D'accord / Ouais / Mmm*	"D'accord" = okay; "Ouais" = informal yes; "Mmm" agreement
Germany	*Ja / Mhm / Genau*	"Ja" = yes; "Mhm" = non-verbal agreement; "Genau exactly
Italy	*Allora / Eh / Mhmm*	"Allora" = transition or acknowledgment; "Eh" = sof agreement
Japan	*Hai hai*	Repeated "yes" to show attentiveness or agreemen
Mexico	*Ajá / Sí / Mmm*	"Ajá" = acknowledgment or mild surprise; "Mmm" = agreement
Saudi Arabia	*Na'am / Aiwa / Mm*	"Na'am" = formal yes; "Aiwa" = informal yes/okay; " non-verbal
Spain	*Vale / Ya / Ajá*	"Vale" = okay; "Ya" = already (used to affirm); "Ajá" acknowledgment

Country / Region	Word / Phrase	Meaning / Usage
United States	*Uh huh / Mm-hmm*	Casual acknowledgment, often non-verbal

How conversations flow varies with culture and context. In situations in which a strict hierarchy is present or when the interaction is highly formal, there may be fixed patterns for managing a conversation and signaling when it is over. In such situations, interrupting a speaker may be inappropriate. There are conversational norms which may play a role. In particular cultures, it is common, even expected, for others to interrupt a speaker frequently. In France, for example, this is seen as part of what constitutes a good conversation.

[Interruptions] signal interest in the other's remark, which merits a commentary, a word of appreciation, denial, protest, or laughter–in short, a reaction without which the remark would 'fall flat.' The ball is tossed to be caught and tossed back. Where there is no 'interruption,' when each person speaks sedately in turn (as in American conversation, according to the French), the conversation never 'takes off'; it remains polite, formal, cold (Carroll, 1988, p. 37).

While this kind of spontaneity and frequent back-and-forth is seen by the French (and in other cultures) as stimulating, it may be seen by some as chaotic or rude. Our cultural backgrounds tend to lead us to make assumptions about others based on paralinguistic clues. One of these clues is the speaker's accent. Non-native accents can often stigmatize the speaker, evoking stereotypes associated with social class, ethnic background, economic status, or level of education. In some cases, a particular accent, such as a British accent in the US, is perceived positively. In most cases, however, accents are perceived negatively and may have real-world consequences for the speaker in terms of discrimination in personal encounters or institutional settings. As is the case with other forms of nonverbal communication across cultures, paralinguistic behaviors vary across cultures and can lead to misunderstanding of another person's intentions or feelings. Harry Triandis (1994) provides a dramatic example of misinterpreting vocal clues:

> In January, 1991, James Baker, then the United States Secretary of State, met with Tariq Aziz, the Foreign Minister of Iraq. They met in an effort to reach an agreement that would prevent a war. Also present in the room was the half-brother of Saddam Hussein, whose role included frequent calls to Hussein with updates on the talks. Baker stated, in his standard calm manner, that the US. would attack if Iraq did not move out of Kuwait. Hussein 's half-brother heard these words and reported that "The Americans will not attack. They are weak. They are calm. They are not angry. They are only talking." Six days later Iraq saw Desert Storm and the loss of about 175,000 of their citizens. Triandis argued that Iraqis attend to how something is said more than what is said. He further suggests that if Baker had pounded the table, yelled, and shown outward signs of anger, the outcome may have been entirely different (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 277).

Haptics

Touch in communication interaction is called **haptics**, from the ancient Greek word "*haptien.*" Cultural norms have a strong impact on how people use and perceive touch. Touch conventions vary significantly across cultures and are dependent as well on age, gender, and relationship. In some Arab cultures, it is common for men to hold hands in particular situations to show close relationships. Some cultures have a taboo on touching the top of someone's head, as in patting a child, as the head is considered sacred. Another taboo, in India, the Middle East, and Africa, is the use of the left hand in certain social situations, such as eating. Cooper, Calloway-Thomas & Simonds (2007) provide a set of rules in relation to touch in Thai culture:

- Don't touch anyone's head for any reason. The head is the most important part of the body. It is the seat of the soul.
- Do not touch a female on any part of her body.
- The feet are considered the "dirtiest" part of the body. They are used only for walking. Thus, it is an insult to rest your feet on someone else's backrest, such as in the cinema or on a train.
- Women must never touch a monk or his robe. Even in a bus or train, Women cannot sit next to a monk.
- Always accept things with your right hand. The left hand is used to Wash the posterior and is therefore regarded as unclean (p. 138).

Hall (1963) suggests that the use of proxemics and haptics merge within a culture to create what researchers now call contact and noncontact cultures. In **contact cultures**, people stand closer together while talking, touch more frequently, and speak in

louder voices. Some examples of contact cultures are cultures in Central and South America, the Middle East, and Eastern and Mediterranean Europe. For example, Latin American cultures tend to hug more than do Northern Europeans. In **noncontact cultures**, people stand farther apart while talking and touch less. Some examples of noncontact cultures are Great Britain, the United States, and Japan. This difference is exemplified in a study of outdoor cafes in London, England and San Juan, Puerto Rico. Researchers found that Puerto Ricans touched each other an average of 180 times per hour whereas the British average was zero (EPA, 2002). Being aware of such norms in visiting another culture can make seemingly strange behavior understandable and help to avoid embarrassing faux pas.

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6.4: Spatial, Temporal, and Environmental Signals

When it comes to nonverbal communication, we don't just rely on gestures or facial expressions—we also use space, time, and objects to send powerful messages. Think about how close you stand to someone, how long you wait before replying to a text, or what your outfit says about you before you even speak. These subtle choices reflect cultural values, personal boundaries, and social expectations. In this section, you'll explore how *proxemics* (use of space), *chronemics* (use of time), and *artifacts and physical appearance* (objects, clothing, and surroundings) shape the way we connect with others—often more than words ever could.

Proxemics

Coming from the Latin *proximus,* meaning "near," proxemics refers to communication through the use of physical distance or space. Edward Hall (1966) pioneered the study of proxemics, the perception and use of physical space, including territoriality and personal space. Territoriality is related to control. Who gets the corner office? Who sits at the head of the table and why? Personal space refers to the conversation distance, or the "bubble" of space surrounding each individual. One of the actions that can affect the course of the conversation is for one or the other of the conversants to move closer or further away. Following complaints from both Arab and US students in a North American university setting, O.M. Watson (1970) investigated the nonverbal behavior of the two groups. He found that the US students viewed the Arabs as pushy and rude, while the Arabs considered the US students to be distant and rude. He discovered that a substantial part of the problem were different conceptions of personal space, with the US students feeling the Arab students were invading their bubbles and the Arab students seeing the US students as unfriendly because they were keeping their distance. Hall (1966) developed a four-level classification of social distance.

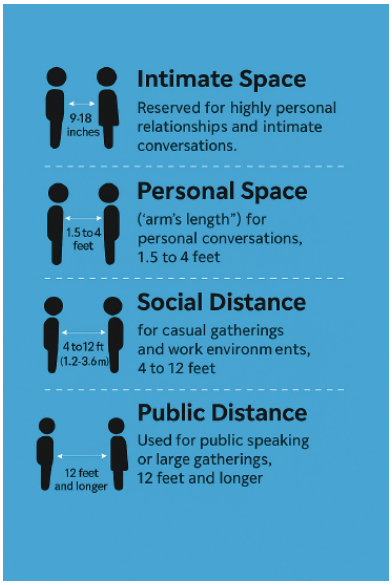


Figure 6.4.1: The four US spatial zones.

For the US, he defined four spatial zones:

- Intimate space, reserved for highly personal relationships and intimate conversations, as 9 to 18 inches (23 to 45 cm).
- Personal Space, ("arm's length") for personal conversations, 1.5 to 4 feet (.5 to 1.2 m).
- Social distance, for causal gatherings and work environments, 4 to 12 feet (1.2 to 3.6 m).
- Public distance, used for public speaking or large gatherings, 12 feet and longer.

Researchers have identified particular cultures as having a preference for closer proximity and a high degree of physical contact (Aiello, 1987). Examples frequently given are Arabs, Latin Americans, and southern Europeans. Cultures who prefer further interaction distances include the USA, Northern Europe, and Australia. There are other factors besides regional culture which may affect personal distance, such as gender, age, ethnicity, or topic of conversation.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage refers to the vocal qualities and nonverbal sounds that accompany spoken language. While words carry literal meaning, paralanguage shapes *how* those words are expressed and interpreted. Vocal cues such as pitch, pace, pauses, volume, and silence—play a central role in intercultural communication because they influence how messages are understood across cultural contexts. Paralanguage is produced through physical mechanisms such as the throat, nasal cavities, tongue, lips, mouth, and jaw, and it often conveys emotion, attitude, and relational meaning beyond the words themselves.

Pitch

Pitch refers to how high or low a voice sounds, based on the vibration rate of the vocal folds. Cultural norms strongly influence how pitch is used and interpreted. For example, in some Caribbean cultures, a lively, melodic pitch pattern may signal friendliness and warmth, while in some Northern European contexts, a more monotone pitch may be associated with professionalism or emotional restraint.

Pace

Pace is the speed at which someone speaks, and it varies widely across cultures. In many Spanish-speaking regions, a faster pace can signal passion and involvement in the conversation. In contrast, in many Scandinavian cultures, a slower, more deliberate pace may be valued as a sign of thoughtfulness and respect. These differences can lead to misunderstandings: a fast pace may be misread as impatience, while a slow pace may be misinterpreted as disinterest, depending on the listener's cultural expectations.

Volume

Volume refers to how loudly or softly someone speaks. Cultural expectations shape what is considered appropriate. In many Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, speaking with a strong, resonant volume can signal sincerity and engagement. In contrast, in many Thai or Finnish contexts, softer volume is associated with politeness and emotional control. These differences can lead to misinterpretations: a loud voice may be perceived as aggressive by someone from a quieter speech culture, while a soft voice may be perceived as lacking confidence by someone from a louder speech culture.

Silence

Silence is a powerful and culturally meaningful form of paralanguage. In some Indigenous cultures, such as Navajo or Hopi communities, silence is used to show respect, allow space for reflection, or signal careful consideration before responding. In contrast, in many U.S. American or Italian communication settings, long silences may feel uncomfortable and may be interpreted as disagreement or disengagement. In some East African cultures, silence during greetings or negotiations can signal patience and seriousness, while in some East Asian contexts, silence may be used to maintain harmony and avoid confrontation. Understanding these cultural variations helps communicators avoid misreading silence and fosters more respectful, culturally attuned interactions.

Student Voices

A Moment of Silence in Tokyo



Photo by: Ivan Bernal Torres

During my time in Japan, I experienced a cultural bump that helped me understand how silence can communicate respect in ways that are very different from what I am used to. The moment happened on a train in Tokyo while I was talking with a friend at what felt like a normal speaking volume. In the United States, that level of conversation on public transportation is completely acceptable, so I did not think anything of it. After a short time, I noticed a few passengers giving us quick glances and annoyed looks. They were not angry or confrontational, but their reactions made me realize that something about our behavior did not match the environment around us. When I paused and paid closer attention, I noticed that the entire train was almost completely silent. The soft hum of the train made the quiet atmosphere feel even more noticeable. Many people were resting, reading, or simply sitting quietly, and the atmosphere was calm and respectful. My normal speaking voice, which would barely stand out at home, suddenly felt as if I were speaking to an entire audience. I felt a little embarrassed, but also curious about why silence mattered so much in this space. Once I recognized the expectations of the other passengers, I quickly lowered my voice and adjusted to the environment, and the tension immediately faded.

This experience helped me understand the deeper cultural meaning behind silence in Japan. On trains, quiet behavior functions as a form of nonverbal communication that shows awareness and respect for everyone sharing the space. It is a shared norm that helps create a comfortable environment, giving people a chance to rest, think, or simply enjoy a peaceful moment during their commute. What felt normal to me in the United States contrasted with a cultural value in Japan that emphasized being more aware and considerate of others. Recognizing this difference helped me see how silence can be used as a form of communication without using a single word. It also made me more conscious of how my own habits do not always translate across cultures. Even though it was a small moment, it taught me how powerful silence can be in shaping respectful shared spaces.

Ivan Bernal Torres, Cerritos College Student



Figure 6.4.2: In some cultures, people like to keep their distance



Figure 6.4.3: Inside a men's bathroom at a University in Madrid, Spain (CC By; Tom Grothe)

Cultural Close-Up

Close that door! You're in Germany

The mutual influences of clarity and order reinforce one another and help create a strong tendency toward compartmentalization in all areas of their lives, for example, inside their dwellings. The open architecture typical of American houses and apartments in which the front door opens into the living room is not common. Walk into a traditional German home or apartment, and you will usually find yourself in a small, closed corridor, or Gang. This corridor provides access to the other rooms of the house or apartment, and the doors to these other rooms will generally be closed. This configuration is considered orderly...Doors remain closed in most German public and office buildings, where a closed door does not mean a private meeting is taking place, but only that the door is closed as German notions of orderliness and clear boundaries dictate (p. 48).

> Naked? "This is Brazil. No one cares."
>
> When I lived in Brazil, I was on the Amazon River…The environment clearly interacted with everyday life. Daily temperatures were usually in the 90s and 100s F. [35-40 C.], with a very high humidity. When you show up at someone's home, they offer you a shower instead of a drink. You take off your clothes, hop in the shower to cool down (but never after eating, because faz mal ["it harms you"]), then put on the same clothes. One time, I went to the shared shower-shed between the houses in the housing area (a wooden shed with a garden hose hanging down). There was a wood plank missing. I went back and asked my host, "What do you wear to shower here?" He laughed and said, "Nothing, of course!" "But there's a board missing," I said. "John," he replied, "this is Brazil. No one cares." This leads to the notion that, because of climate and social factors, the notion of modesty was also quite different…Many of my friends thought nothing of using my cologne, my toothpaste., even my toothbrush…Because of crowdedness, especially among the working classes, privacy is conceptualized differently. If I stayed at a friend's house, I would expect to bring my own hammock and string it across the living room—often with other family members
>
> Baldwin, 2008

Chronemics



Figure 6.2.4: An assortment of clocks created by CoPilot.

Time orientation, known as Chronemics**,** is the study of how we refer to, use, and perceive time. The different perceptions of time, such as the importance of punctuality, can be a source of friction in intercultural encounters. Edward Hall (1959) distinguished between **monochronic** and **polychronic** orientations to time. In monochronic time orientation, time is a commodity. Being punctual, completing tasks, and keeping schedules is valued, and may be more important than building or maintaining personal relationships. "Time is money" is a common saying across cultures monochronic-oriented cultures. Those growing up in a culture with a monochronic time orientation are likely to see this view of time as natural and universal. In fact, it is culturally determined and learned. In such cultures, like the US or Germany, children are taught early, at home and in school, the importance of time, scheduling, and promptness. Tardiness and missed appointments are a source of anxiety. Monochronic-oriented cultures perceive time as linear, flowing along in a straight line. We did one task, we're doing another task now, and we are planning on doing something else later. Plans are not easily changed. People live by an external clock.

In **polychronic** time-oriented cultures, however, the attitudes towards time are very different. Representative cultures include the Polynesian Islands, southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Schedules are less important, and punctuality is not considered an essential virtue. Such cultures are used to having more than one activity or conversation going on at the same time. Individuals are more tolerant of interruptions and going beyond the scheduled time. Time is bent to meet the needs of people, with the attitude that there is always more time. Consequently, plans are fluid. People live by an internal clock. Greater importance is placed on the natural progress of conversations than in keeping to a pre-arranged schedule. Life is lived in the

moment, not in relation to a schedule.

Different perceptions of time can vary dramatically when it comes to arranging meetings. Some Mexican American friends may invite you to a barbecue at 8 p.m., but when you arrive you are the first guest, because it is understood that the gathering actually doesn't start until well after 9 p.m. Similarly in France, an 8 p.m. party invitation would be understood to indicate you should arrive around 8:30, but in Sweden 8 p.m. means 8 p.m., and latecomers may not be welcome. Of course, context plays a role in time orientation. The Japanese have a monochronic time orientation when it comes to business meetings, but are more polychronic in social gatherings.

Physical Appearance and Artifacts

Physical appearance and artifacts profoundly influence our communication encounters. In other words, how you look conveys as much about you as what you say. Physical appearance includes attributes such as hair, clothing, body type, and personal grooming. Across cultures, people credit individuals they find physically attractive with higher levels of intelligence, persuasiveness, poise, sociability, warmth, power, and employment success than they credit to unattractive individuals (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986). Communication researchers call this tendency to make a blanket judgment of a person based on one trait the **halo** (positive) or **horns** (negative) **effect.** As physical attractiveness is variable across cultures, and constantly being redefined, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Artifacts are the things we possess that influence how we see ourselves and that we use to express our identity to others. They can include rings and tattoos, but may also include brand names and logos. From clothes to cars, watches, briefcases, purses, and even eyeglasses, what we choose to surround ourselves with communicates something about our sense of self. They may project gender, role or position, class or status, personality, and group membership or affiliation.

Many cultures have rules and conventions for dress and appearance, established through custom or religious beliefs. Women in Muslim countries, for example, dress so that their hair is covered and, in some cases, also their bodies and faces. In some cases, dress can provide information about social/economic position, marital status, or age. In Japan, women's *kimonos* vary according to the time of year and occasion, but also based on marital status and age. For the Masai tribe in Kenya, earrings and necklaces designate the marital status of women, while men wear earrings and arm rings that show their social status, indicating whether they are elders or warriors (Vandehey, Buergh & Krueger, 1996). In rural northern India, the level of a woman's veil over her face can indicate romantic interest or disinterest (Lambert & Wood, 2005). Dress and physical appearance can be important identifiers for membership in particular groups. Members of motorcycle gangs wear black leather and heavy boots. Japanese businessmen ("salarymen") wear dark, conservative suits and plain ties. Japanese tourists often wear a resort hotel's *yukata* (a lightweight kimono) signaling to others in the town their role (Ting-Toomey, 1999). In this way, forms of dress serve as identity markers. Certain uniforms signal professions, as in the case of police officers or members of the military, while also conveying a sense of authority and power.



Figure 6.4.5: Woman wearing a niqab (veil)

Body piercings and tattoos, in bygone days, indicators of low-prestige socio-economic status (sailors, carnival workers), have become mainstream among young people in the US and elsewhere. Older people are likely to retain the images from the past and may have a negative view of heavily tattooed or pierced young people. One of the persistent stereotypes is in regards to women's dress and appearance. Young women in mini skirts and tank tops, especially if blonde, may be perceived as flighty and unintelligent. Muslim women wearing a *hijab* face prejudice and discrimination in many non-Muslim countries, which is even more pronounced for those wearing a whole body *burqua*. In some Western countries, wearing traditional Muslim female dress in public or in schools has been banned. In the US, hooded sweatshirts (*hoodies*) are often associated with young black men. In Florida, a young black man, Treyvon Martin, was wearing a hoodie when shot dead by a white "neighborhood watch" member as he was returning from a convenience store. The white man found Martin "suspicious", due to his skin color and attire.



Figure 6.4.6: Tattoos have become commonplace in American culture

Appearance messages are generally the first nonverbal codes we process, sizing up the other person based on skin color, appearance, and clothing. The first impression might determine our attitude towards another person, helping to determine whether we want to get to know that person or not. Sometimes, some features of the other person's appearance might lead to specific prejudgments. One of those might be the particular shade of skin. Black people with darker skin are sometimes viewed as somehow less attractive or having lower status than Blacks with lighter skin. Light-skinned Blacks may feel discriminated against as well. In South American countries such as Brazil, there is a rich mix of ethnicities and races, resulting in a wide range of skin colors and a complex social hierarchy, built in part on the particular shade of one's skin (Lovell & Wood, 1998).

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6.5: Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory



Figure 6.5.1: Man with his hands on his face indicating surprise.

Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory

Just like with other cultural norms, people tend to expect others to follow the "unwritten rules" of nonverbal behavior. In the U.S., for example, we don't expect women to wear headscarves daily, but we do expect a handshake when meeting someone new. That might not happen, though, if you're a man meeting a Muslim woman—because in some cultures, physical contact between unrelated men and women is avoided.

Judee Burgoon's Expectancy Violations Theory (1978) explains how we react when these nonverbal expectations are broken. These reactions, called "arousal", can be physical or mental, and either positive or negative. How we respond depends on things like how big the violation is, how we perceive the person (say, attractive vs. sloppy), and what message we think they're sending. For instance, someone standing too close at a party might feel intrusive, or intriguing, depending on how we perceive them.

Culture plays a big role in how we interpret these behaviors. In high-context cultures, people rely more on nonverbal cues, so silence might be seen as thoughtful rather than awkward. In intercultural situations, a non-native speaker's behavior might come off as charming or rude, depending on our assumptions. Burgoon notes that cultures with strong uncertainty avoidance tend to be stricter about these norms, while those with low power distance may be more relaxed.

Public displays of affection (PDA) are a good example of how norms vary. In many Western countries, it's common to see heterosexual couples kiss or hold hands in public—especially in places like France or Italy (Field, 1999; DiBiase & Gunnoe, 2004). Acceptance of same-sex PDA is growing in the West, but it's still taboo in many other parts of the world. In Muslim cultures, even heterosexual contact in public is often restricted. In India, PDA can spark controversy: in 2007, actor Richard Gere kissed actress Shilpa Shetty at a public event, and the backlash was intense. Photos were burned, and an arrest warrant was issued, with a court calling it "vulgar" (Indian Court, 2007).



Figure 6.5.2: Richard Gere kisses Shilpa Shetty

It is of course not possible to know all the ins and outs of nonverbal transgressions in every country. On the other hand, it is certainly possible to be informed about the cultural practices in countries which we plan to visit or among local communities with whom we are likely to have contact. To the extent possible, we should act in accordance with cultural expectations. That might mean taking off shoes before entering a home, or dressing more modestly than we would normally. On the other hand, we may oppose particular practices for religious, political, or philosophical reasons, and consciously refuse to adapt to local customs. That might mean, for example, women not accepting the prescribed cultural role in behavior, bearing, or dress expected in a particular culture. In general, it is good practice to anticipate nonverbal expectations to the degree possible. Even if we don't know the specifics of expectations in a given culture, we can certainly observe and learn. Burgoon's theory suggests that if we are well-intentioned, yet unaware of specific practices, it is likely others will be lenient in overlooking transgressions. In fact, it may be that expectations for foreigners in this regard are different than they are for natives. Koreans, for example, would likely not expect foreigners to be familiar with the intricacies of bowing as they interface with Korean social hierarchies.

Expectancy Violations Theory offers valuable insight into how our assumptions shape the way we perceive others, particularly in the area of nonverbal communication across cultures. While the theory is often used to explain cultural nuances, such as how eye contact, personal space, or gestures may be perceived differently, it also has broader implications for understanding intercultural communication as a whole. At its core, the theory reminds us that we all carry expectations about how people should behave, and these expectations are deeply rooted in cultural norms and influenced by factors like age, gender, and religion. Our experience of cultural differences often depends on how we interpret another person’s behavior and whether it aligns with what we consider normal or appropriate. By applying Expectancy Violations Theory, we can better understand our own reactions to others and gain insight into how others may perceive us in return.

Suggestions for Communicating Nonverbally Across Cultures

Here are some considerations with respect to nonverbal communication in intercultural encounters:

- *Be cautious in making assumptions based on nonverbal actions*. The same gestures may have quite different meanings in different cultures. We often tend to assume body language and gestures are universal, but that is not the case.
- *Try to understand the cultural values attached to nonverbal conventions*. Try to penetrate beneath the surface of the behavior. Consider as well whether the behavior may be personal and idiosyncratic, rather than cultural and typical.
- *Watch and imitate as appropriate*. As the saying goes, "when in Rome, do as the Romans." In some cases, adopting different nonverbal behavior might be easy and straightforward, for example, bowing in Japan. In other cases, divergence might be more appropriate, for example, refraining from kneeling along with Muslims in prayer services.
- *Learn in advance*. Whether you have the opportunity to travel abroad or to attend a cultural event at home, it is wise to spend a little time to learn about nonverbal cultural rules in advance. For example, in the United States, it is generally considered inappropriate for wedding guests to wear white, as the color is traditionally reserved for the bride; however, in certain African cultures, such as Ghana, white is often embraced as a celebratory color and worn proudly by guests to honor the occasion.

- *Be mindful of hand usage*. In many cultures around the world, the left hand is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene and considered unclean. As a result, it is good practice to avoid using your left hand to pass, accept, or exchange items, especially in formal or intercultural settings.

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6.6: Growing Your Nonverbal Intercultural Communication Skills



Figure 6.7.1: Communicating nonverbally in Xi'an.

Suggestions for Communicating Nonverbally Across Cultures

Just as we adjust our verbal communication depending on our audience or the situation, it's equally important to be mindful of our nonverbal cues. Gestures, eye contact, posture, and personal space can carry very different meanings across cultures. Being aware of these differences—and willing to adapt—can help us communicate more respectfully and effectively in intercultural settings. Below are some tips to keep in mind when navigating nonverbal communication across cultures.

1. **Be cautious in making assumptions based on nonverbal actions.**
   The same gestures may have quite different meanings in different cultures. We often tend to assume body language and gestures are universal, but that is not the case.

2. **Try to understand the cultural values attached to nonverbal conventions.**
   Try to penetrate beneath the surface of the behavior. Consider as well whether the behavior may be personal and idiosyncratic, rather than cultural and typical.

3. **Watch and imitate as appropriate.**
   As the saying goes, "when in Rome, do as the Romans." In some cases, adopting different nonverbal behavior might be easy and straightforward, for example, bowing in Japan. In other cases, divergence might be more appropriate, for example, refraining from kneeling along with Muslims in prayer services.

4. **Learn in advance.**
   Whether you have the opportunity to travel abroad or to attend a cultural event at home, it is wise to spend a little time to learn about nonverbal cultural rules in advance. For example, in the United States, it is generally considered inappropriate for wedding guests to wear white, as the color is traditionally reserved for the bride; however, in certain African cultures, such as Ghana, white is often embraced as a celebratory color and worn proudly by guests to honor the occasion.

5. **Be mindful of hand usage.**
   In many cultures around the world, the left hand is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene and considered unclean. As a result, it is good practice to avoid using your left hand to pass, accept, or exchange items, especially in formal or intercultural

settings.

6. **Respect personal space and proximity norms.**
   What feels like a comfortable conversational distance in one culture may feel intrusive or aloof in another. Pay attention to how close others stand or sit, and adjust accordingly.

7. **Observe eye contact conventions.**
   In some cultures, direct eye contact signals confidence and honesty; in others, it may be seen as disrespectful or confrontational. Consider the age, status, and context before assuming eye contact is appropriate.

8. **Notice silence and pauses.**
   Silence may be uncomfortable in some cultures and deeply respectful in others. A pause might signal reflection, disagreement, or simply a different rhythm of communication. Resist the urge to fill every gap.

9. **Attend to posture and stance.**
   The way one sits, stands, or positions their body can convey attentiveness, humility, authority, or disengagement. What seems casual in one culture may be interpreted as rude or overly familiar in another.

10. **Be aware of facial expressions and emotional display.**
    Smiling, frowning, or showing emotion may be encouraged in some cultures and discouraged in others. Emotional restraint or expressiveness is often culturally shaped, and misinterpretation can easily occur.

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6.7: Conclusion

People may not understand your words, but they will certainly interpret your nonverbal communication according to *their* accepted norms. Notice the word *their*. It is *their* perceptions that will count when you are trying to communicate, and it's important to understand that those perceptions will be based on the teachings and experiences of their culture—not yours. The ideas and theories presented in the previous sections note how we look at the structures of cultures, values, and communication. They also provide a framework for talking about and comparing cultures, but it's always important to remember that cultures are different all over the world, and constantly changing. One size does not fit all and nonverbal communication is ambiguous even in the best of times.

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7: CULTURE SHOCK

Learning Objectives

- Define culture shock and identify common causes
- Describe the affective, behavioral, and cognitive components of culture shock
- Illustrate W-Shape Model of Culture Shock
- Summarize tips to manage feelings of culture shock

7.1: Introduction to Culture Shock

7.2: The ABCs of Culture Shock

7.3: Models of Culture Shock

7.4: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills to Manage Culture Shock

7.5: Conclusion

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7.1: Introduction to Culture Shock

Cultural Connection

Cultural Adventures: At age six, just two months shy of turning seven, my grandmother brought my younger brother and me to the United States to be reunited with our parents and older sister. We left everything we knew for those first years of our lives in Taipei, Taiwan, for a brand new world! It was exciting - until it wasn't... We left a very structured, collectivistic culture where we went to school in uniforms five and a half days a week to an individualistic, laid-back environment where the school was in one huge room with grades and classes separated by flimsy partitions (This was in Honolulu, Hawaii, in the mid-1970s). We could only speak Chinese at the time and understood not a single word anyone at school was saying. ¯_(ツ)_/¯ A month after arriving in Hawaii, we packed up and moved to California! We experienced two major moves within a short period. Imagine our culture shock when we arrived in Hawaii (right, don't feel too bad... it was beautiful!). Imagine our culture shock again when we landed in Los Angeles, California! As with any living organism in the universe, we had to get **MAD**: **M**ove, **A**dapt, or **D**ie! Since "MOVING" back to Taiwan was not an option, and "DYING" was even less of an option, we had to learn to "ADAPT."



Figure 7.1.1: Tapei in the 1970s



Figure 7.1.2: Kim and her siblings in Honolulu, Hawaii



Figure 7.1.3: LAX in the 1970s

As we can see from Kim's story above, stepping into a new cultural environment, whether moving across the globe or starting a new school, can feel like playing a game where the rules are unfamiliar and the expectations suddenly shift. The excitement of everything new often mingles with confusion, discomfort, or even frustration. These emotional ups and downs aren't unusual; they're part of a well-documented experience known as *culture shock*. In this chapter, we'll explore culture shock, the signs and symptoms, the causes, and how students can prepare themselves to navigate it with resilience and curiosity. Understanding this experience is a key to thriving in diverse communities and building meaningful intercultural connections.

Culture Shock Overview

In your reading of this textbook thus far, we have discussed many theories and principles to help you understand the dynamics of intercultural communication. But understanding intercultural communication is not the same thing as experiencing it. To experience intercultural communication, one needs to get off the couch and set foot into a new and unfamiliar culture. When a person moves to a cultural environment that is different than their own, they often experience personal disorientation called

culture shock. **Culture shock,** a term coined by Canadian Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in 1954, refers to the anxiety and discomfort we feel when moving from a familiar environment to an unfamiliar one. In our own culture, through time, we have learned the million and one ways to communicate appropriately with friends, family members, colleagues, and others. We know how to great people, when and how to give tips, whether to stand or sit, how much eye contact to make, when to accept and refuse invitations, how to understand directions, whether others are being sarcastic or not, how holidays are and are not celebrated, how to shop for and prepare food, how to find the restroom, and generally how to communicate verbally and nonverbally in any given social situation. When we enter a new culture, many of those familiar signs and signals are gone, leading us to feel helplessly lost in many circumstances. Yet despite these challenges, global mobility continues to rise—making cultural adaptation not just a possibility, but a necessity.

The likelihood of travel in your lifetime is high, whether it be for business, school, pleasure, or to relocate permanently. Consider some of these statistics. A 2025 travel forecast projects a 4.0% growth in business travel spending for the year, reaching $316 billion, with 36% of Americans saying they expect to travel for business this year (U.S. Travel Association, 2025). Based on recent analyses and trends, the top business travel destinations for Americans include a mix of global financial hubs and major US cities, including:

- London, UK
- Singapore
- Tokyo, Japan
- New York City, New York
- Los Angeles, California
- Chicago, Illinois
- Paris, France
- Mexico City, Mexico
- Toronto, Canada
- Dubai, UAE 🇦🇪

College and university students are also studying abroad in record numbers. According to the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors (NAFSA, 2025), during the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of U.S. students who studied abroad for credit was 280,716. This represents a 49% increase from the previous year (the shift is largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which restricted travel in 2020 and 2021). Based on current travel trends, the top 10 countries for study abroad by U.S. students include:

- United Kingdom
- Canada
- Australia
- Germany
- Spain
- Italy
- France
- South Korea
- Japan
- New Zealand

Travel for recreation has dramatically increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, as travelers are trying to make up for lost time. In fact, we are witnessing an increase in specific types of recreational travel, such as travel for sporting events (like the Olympics), travel for Music events, and fitness travel (such as international hiking excursions). According to Travel Perks (2025), a company devoted to examining travel trends, estimated that 98.46 million Americans took international trips in 2024. The top international travel destinations include (You.Gov(opens in new window) 2025):

- Mexico
- Canada
- United Kingdom
- France
- Italy
- Germany
- Spain
- Japan
- South Korea
- Dominican Republic

Whether traveling for business, study, or leisure, millions of Americans are stepping into unfamiliar cultural landscapes each year. But crossing borders isn't just about booking flights and getting the best pictures; it's also about navigating the invisible terrain of human experience. That's where the ABCs of culture shock come in.

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7.2: The ABCs of Culture Shock

7.2: The ABCs of Culture Shock

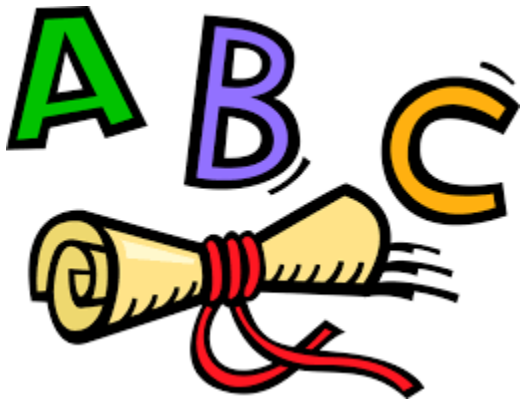


Figure 7.2.1: Colorful A, B, C's

Culture shock is first and foremost an emotional response to a change in our cultural environment, but it also impacts how we act and how we think. The ABCs of culture shock refer to the affective, behavioral, and cognitive changes brought on by culture shock. The **affective** dimension of culture shock refers to the anxiety, bewilderment, and disorientation of experiencing a new culture. Oberg (1960) believed that due to a loss of familiar signs, culture shock produced an identity loss and confusion from the psychological toll exerted to adjust to a new culture. The **behavioral** dimension refers to confusion over the behaviors of people in the host culture. We don't understand why people are behaving the way they are in certain situations, and we are not sure how to act appropriately. The **cognitive** dimension refers to our inability to interpret our new environment or understand these "bizarre" social experiences.

For example, imagine that you are stepping into Tokyo's Shinjuku Station or navigating the Paris Métro for the first time. The sheer volume of people, the speed of movement, and the expectation that you already know how to read signs and tap cards, combined with a fear of getting on the wrong train, can be overwhelming. For someone used to the solitude and control of driving in Los Angeles, public transportation abroad flips the script. Through the *affective dimension*, we can see that someone might feel disoriented by the new transportation system, which in turn can cause some anxiety and feelings of trepidation. The *behavioral dimensions* are exhibited in that we both have to change our behavior (adapt), and we may be baffled by the behaviors of others. For example, 750,000 passengers travel daily through the Shinjuku Station in Tokyo, yet people rarely talk, and phone calls are considered disruptive. Last, the *cognitive dimension* is on display as visitors try to process the silence, with behaviors like not speaking on the train or avoiding eye contact may be misinterpreted as coldness or indifference, when it is actually a sign of respect. As a traveler, individuals need to rethink the meaning of social cues.

This kind of disorientation is a classic gateway into culture shock; it's not just about transportation, but about how deeply held cultural values and practices shape everyday life. In the next section, we'll explore the underlying factors that contribute to culture shock.

Underlying Factors Contributing to Culture Shock

Over the past several decades, there have been numerous peer-reviewed, scholarly studies documenting the effects of culture shock. The research suggests that nearly everybody who enters a new culture will experience some form of culture shock, but not everybody experiences culture shock the same way. How long culture shock lasts and the degree to which it is felt will vary according to several underlying factors, including motivations for travel, personal expectations, socio-cultural adjustment, and personal attributes.

Motivational Orientation

One of the most important factors is **motivational orientation**. Some people travel willingly and are excited to enter a new

culture. Students who decide to study abroad, travelers who want to explore the world, and families who go on vacations provide a few examples. These groups generally have a high motivational orientation and generally have an easier time adapting to culture shock. By contrast, others enter a new culture reluctantly or unwillingly. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 70.8 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. These include refugees, asylum-seekers, and internally displaced people. To put that number in perspective, that is 1 out of every one hundred people on the planet. This is the highest number in human history, and it is only expected to grow as war and conflicts continue, and catastrophic climate change threatens to make many parts of the world uninhabitable in the near future. These people generally have a low motivational orientation as they do not want to leave their home cultures, but do so because their very survival depends on it.

Cultural Close-Up

When I was in graduate school in San Francisco, I took a semester off and traveled for 4 months through several Asian countries. On that trip, I met a German woman while on a boat from Sumatra to Malaysia. We traveled together up to Thailand before parting ways. Months later, she came to visit and later moved into my apartment in San Francisco. Eventually, we married and have been together ever since. But back in those days in San Francisco, we had a roommate who saw our relationship develop firsthand. He wasn't having much luck with the dating scene in San Francisco and decided that he, too, would like to meet a "European girl." So he set off for a month to Thailand and India, hoping he would find "the girl of his dreams." This anecdote speaks to another underlying factor, **personal expectations**. People with high expectations for their cultural experiences tend to struggle more with culture shock. Those who travel with an open mind and heart, who take the experiences as they come in a more spontaneous way, tend to adapt better. Needless to say, my former roommate did not find his ideal partner and returned home sharing more stories of frustrating experiences rather than enriching ones.

When we travel to a new culture, the cultural distance between our home culture and the host culture impacts our level of culture shock. This distance can be physical, but more importantly, **cultural distance** refers to the degree of difference in culture between the known, home environment and the new one. When we travel to destinations where people speak a different language, have different racial features, practice a different religion, and have significantly different customs and traditions, we typically feel a greater degree of culture shock. As someone born and raised in Northern California, I experienced much more culture shock when I traveled to India than when I visited Vancouver, Canada.

Tom Grothke, Exploring Intercultural Communication

Sociocultural Adjustment

Another factor that influences the degree of culture shock is **sociocultural adjustment**, which refers to the ability of the traveler to fit in and interact with members of the host culture. The level of sociocultural adjustment largely rests on the host's attitudes toward visitors to their culture. One attitude of hosts towards tourists is retreatism. **Retreatism** basically means that hosts actively avoid contact with tourists by looking for ways to hide their everyday lives. Tourists may not be aware of this attitude because the host economy may be dependent upon tourism. Such dependence could force the host community to accommodate tourists with tolerance. Hawaii is a place that depends heavily on tourism and often uses various forms of retreatism to cope with the tourist invasion. Several students have mentioned that, other than people who worked at restaurants or on tourist excursions, they didn't see many locals when vacationing in Hawaii. Another attitude of hosts towards tourists is **resistance**. This attitude can be passive or aggressive. Passive resistance may include grumbling, gossiping about, or making fun of tourists behind their backs. Aggressive resistance often takes more active forms, such as pretending not to speak a language or giving incorrect information or directions. In the summer of 2025, there was a concerted effort across Southern Europe led by a network of activist groups to protest the touristification of their cities. Protesters used tools like water guns and water balloons to annoy travelers (Washington Post, June 16, 2025). In the summer of 2019, Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau pledged to reduce the number of tourists, cutting cruise ships and limiting expansion of its airport. These actions came in response to an incredible surge of tourism. As The Guardian reported in 2016, the number of visitors making overnight stays in the city increased from 1.7 million in 1990 to more than 8 million in 16 years. That's an astonishing increase for a city that is not as big as other European equivalents, such as Paris or London, and where many of the major tourist sites, such as Sagrada Familia and Parc Güell, are in residential areas where space to expand simply doesn't exist. Further, traveling can be expensive, and travelers are often—but not always–more economically and socially privileged than their hosts. This dynamic can lead to power imbalances between hosts and tourists. Not all host attitudes are protective or negative. Some communities may capitalize on tourism and accept it as the social fabric of their community. Other communities actively invest money to draw tourists as a way to create economic well-being. This attitude is called **revitalization.** Residents do not always share equally in the revitalization, but sometimes it does lead to pride in the

rediscovery of community history and traditions. Dolly Parton's "Dollywood", located in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, was created as a way to revitalize a community that she loved, much as eco-tourism is a revitalizing force in Costa Rica.

Personality Attributes

Of course, individual **personality attributes** play a factor in how well one copes with culture shock. Generally speaking, people with greater tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity respond better to unknown and unanticipated experiences that occur when encountering other cultures. Those who are inflexible or set in their ways tend to struggle more with culture shock. Experience matters here. First-time travelers are likely to experience more culture shock simply because of the novelty of the situation. Experienced travelers have experienced culture shock in the past and have developed coping mechanisms when they find themselves in that situation again.

Cultural Close-Up

In 2017, I found myself hopelessly lost walking inside the Medina in Fez, Morocco. The Medina is a walled city formed in the 9th century. It is home to the oldest University in the world. The Medina consists of over 9,000 unmarked narrow alleyways. I had been walking for nearly 2 hours trying to get back to my guest house. I asked dozens of people for help, but due to language and cultural barriers, I was having no luck. I had been warned that tourists shouldn't walk through the Medina alone at night, and as night began to fall, I started to wonder if I would ever find my way out of that incredibly complex labyrinth. Fortunately, this wasn't my first rodeo, as the saying goes. I had previously traveled to 47 different countries on 5 continents. I hiked a volcano alone in the middle of the night in Panama, trekked to the glacial source of the Ganges River in India, sat beside burning human bodies at cremation ceremonies in Nepal, and endured harrowing bus rides on roads cut from cliffs in the Andes of Bolivia. Drawing on those past experiences, I didn't let culture shock get the best of me and eventually found my way back home.

Tom Grothke, Exploring Intercultural Communication



Figure 7.2.2: A tannery in the Medina, Fez, Morocco.



Figure 7.2.3: A pedestrian walkway in Suzhou, China. (CC BY; Tom Grothe)

Study Abroad

Culture shock has been studied extensively in connection with study abroad programs (see Kinginger, 2008; Salisbury, An, & Pascarella, 2013). Many students from across the globe take the opportunity to study at universities in other countries—whether through short summer or winter programs lasting 4 to 6 weeks, or longer stays like a full semester or more. In fact, California Community Colleges are increasingly investing in global education programs to expand access and support student success abroad. Students may participate as part of a group, through an exchange program, or independently. The European Erasmus Exchange Program has enabled large numbers of students from European countries to study and receive university credit at other universities in Europe. The kind of experience one has through study abroad varies considerably depending on the manner in which it is organized. Going abroad with a group from one's own culture and attending special university classes together limits the exposure to the target culture and its language. Organizing an independent study abroad experience is more difficult, as one must arrange oneself for university registration, selection of courses, and housing. In the process, however, one is likely to gain greater socio-cultural competence and more integration into the target culture and language. On the other hand, independent students lack the support system available to groups.



Figure 7.2.4: Students on a Butte College Study Abroad program learn the art of coffee cultivation in Costa Rica. (CC BY; Tom Grothe)

Whether one engages in study abroad independently or as a member of a group, individual disposition/personality and the local context will determine the degree of success and personal satisfaction. Hua (2013) points out that many study abroad experiences result in an increase in oral proficiency in the target language and in intercultural understanding and competence. However, that varies tremendously depending on the individual. One might have the kind of limited exposure described here:

> Her daily routine included attendance at required classes, after which she would go immediately to the study abroad center sponsored by her home university where she would stay until closing time, surfing the English language Internet and exchanging emails and Instant Messages with her friends and family in the U.S. Outside of service encounters, framed in various ways in her journal as threats to her well-being, she made little effort to engage speakers of French, limiting her use of the language to her courses. (Kinginger & Belz, 2005, p. 411)

In fact, the issue of technology in study abroad is controversial. Some have advocated a restricted use of technology while abroad, so as to maximize real-life contact with the members of the target culture (Doerr, 2013). Some programs go so far as to forbid the use of phones while participating in the program (Godwin-Jones, 2016). On the other hand, online access to home communities can be a tremendous help in psychological adjustment and in recovering from culture shock. Maintaining a blog, diary, or reflective journal provides a mechanism for sharing the experience and reflecting on what one discovers, as described in the last section of this chapter.

In addition to studying abroad, there are other avenues for university-age students to have meaningful, longer-term encounters with a foreign culture. There are opportunities to engage in volunteer services abroad, through government agencies, NGOs, or religious groups. One method that has a long history, particularly in Europe, is to serve as an "au pair", living with a host family and helping with childcare and other light domestic work. Working abroad in other capacities is possible as well, although finding appropriate jobs and obtaining necessary work permits, depending on the country, may be difficult. All these options carry with them the advantage of being a tourist or student in that they tend to offer more complete integration into everyday life in the foreign country. Living with a host family or entering into a working environment automatically supplies contacts with members of the culture. Particularly attractive are internships abroad, which, in addition to supplying cultural and work experience, offer the possibility of future employment.



Figure 7.2.5: Columbian working as an au pair.

Contributions and Attributions

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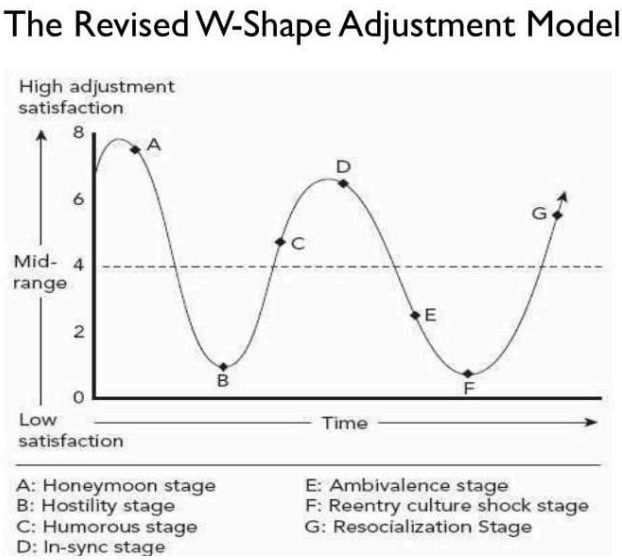
7.3: Models of Culture Shock

Stress-Adaption-Growth Dynamic Model

Have you ever found yourself feeling uneasy or stressed in a new environment, such as starting at a new school or job? The feelings we experience in these situations are similar to culture shock, and one way to understand this process is through Young Yun Kim's *Stress–Adaptation–Growth Dynamic* model. Kim (2017) explains that adapting to a new culture is not a smooth, one-time event but a recurring cycle. First, people encounter **stress** when faced with unfamiliar norms, such as different languages and behavioral expectations. Next, they engage in **adaptation** by learning new ways of thinking and behaving (ie: learning how to make requests in a new language). Finally, they experience **growth** as they expand their resilience and intercultural competence. This growth helps to build confidence across different areas of your life (ie: if I can navigate the public transportation system in London, I can adapt to anything).

This cycle repeats over time, meaning that each stressful encounter can become an opportunity for deeper adaptation and personal development. In other words, as we adjust to new settings, it is normal to experience unease and stress, and if we find ways to adapt to the new setting, we then experience growth. So, rather than seeing culture shock as purely negative, Kim's model reframes it as a natural and necessary process of becoming more flexible, resourceful, and capable of navigating cultural contexts. In addition to the Stress-Adaption-Growth Model, the Revised W-Shape Adjustment Model can help explain typical stages of culture shock.

The Revised W-Shape Adjustment Model



In

Figure 7.3.1: The Revised W-Model of Culture Shock

As we've explored, culture shock is a complex experience shaped by many different factors. Its causes can vary widely, and its impact can range from mildly uncomfortable to deeply disorienting. Over time, scholars have developed models to help us understand the stages of cultural adjustment. One of the earliest is Lysgaard's (1955) **U-Curve Model**, which outlines three phases: Honeymoon, Crisis, and Adjustment. Building on this, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) introduced the **W-Curve Model**, which adds two additional stages to account for the challenges of returning home and experiencing reverse culture shock. More recently, Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) proposed a **Revised W-Shape Model** that expands the framework to include seven distinct stages, offering a more nuanced view of both short-term and long-term cultural adaptation. You might relate to the Revised W-Shape Model if you think of it like the emotional journey of starting at a new school—whether it's high school or college, and the need to adapt to a new environment with new rules. Each stage mirrors the ups and downs of finding your place in a new

environment:

The **preparation stage** occurs before embarking on your new adventure. Like the name implies, this stage occurs as you are preparing for your travels, whether a short vacation or an extended stay. This stage is often fun and filled with anticipation, such as packing your luggage, getting your travel documents in order, and planning what you will do during your visit. For example, when Scout, a community college student, decided to study abroad in Japan with her college for a semester, her preparation stage took careful planning. Students were limited to one suitcase, although they would be living in Japan through the season, the end of summer, fall, and early winter. Students were advised to get their Suica card in advance of the trip. A Suica card is a type of debit card that is used for small purchases and travel.

Student Voice



Figure 7.3.2 Photo by Alyssa Islas

Hafa Adai: Culture Shock in Guam

I experienced culture shock while living on Guam. Before moving there, I lived in Arizona, in a desert region where everything felt fast-paced and dry. I was 17 when I moved to Guam because of my dad's military orders. When I first arrived, I was pretty excited to experience new things and meet new people. I was in the **Honeymoon stage** for the first couple of weeks. Everything felt new and interesting, especially the ocean views.

However, after some time, I started to miss my home and felt homesick. I was in the **Participant stage** at this point. Life on Guam was very different from what I was used to. The humid tropical island weather was the complete opposite of Arizona's dry desert heat. Every day, things felt unfamiliar, especially the unique local foods and the overall quality of life. Many businesses were only open for half a day and only a few days a week, which was the biggest adjustment for me. I was so used to having everything available almost 24/7. Over time, I slowly started to adapt to the local culture. Something I noticed is that people on Guam always say Håfa Adai, which means "hello" or "how's it going", and eventually I developed the habit of saying it too. As time went on, I became way more comfortable with the slower pace of life on a small island.

Funnily enough, after moving back to the mainland, I actually started feeling homesick for Guam. I found myself missing the same select foods and the humid island air (which I never thought I'd say!).

Alyssa Islas, Physics Major, and transfer student

The preparation stage is followed by the honeymoon stage. The **honeymoon stage** kicks off at the start of the journey, and is characterized by anticipation and excitement of the new experience. At this stage, the traveler is fascinated by features such as the food, architecture, people, and overall environment of the new culture. Scout recalls her excitement at eating authentic ramen

and sushi for the first time, as well as shopping in some popular Japanese stores such as Don Quijote.

After individuals settle into their new way of life, they may find themselves shifting into the **hostility or participant** stage. This stage of culture shock is where the individual experiences identity confusion, stress, and frustration with the host culture's differences. Simple day-to-day experiences, such as confusion over money exchange, frustration with public transportation, or a lack of favorite comfort foods, can cause individuals to experience stress and doubt over their experience. Common symptoms of this stage include homesickness, feelings of helplessness, disorientation, isolation, depression, irritability, sleeping and eating disturbances, loss of focus, and more. This is the stage where some explorers may give up on their adventure and return home if they can.

Explorers who survive the hostility stage may find themselves moving into the **humorous stage**. The humorous stage is a turning point where the individual begins to cope with cultural differences by laughing at their own cultural bumps and embracing the pros and cons of both cultures. For Scout, during her time in Japan, transportation was one of the best and most challenging parts of the trip. While she loved that she could walk most places and take advantage of the great train system, she often found the trains to be very overwhelming and disorienting. She can laugh at herself now in hindsight because she learned to navigate by asking school children to help find her way.

The next stage of culture shock is the **In-Sync stage. During this stage of** adjustment, the individual feels a sense of security and inclusion within the new culture, developing a routine and feeling "at home." This author recently watched the final season of the Amazon Prime show “The Summer I Turned Pretty,” and we can see an example of this stage with the main character, Belly, who moves to Paris. In the final episodes of the show, she has immersed herself in French culture, learning the language, making friends, getting a job, and even adapting the chic Parisian women's fashion aesthetic.

Student Voices

Culture Shock at Home

A time I felt culture shock was when I realized people consumed meat. I’m a first-generation Indian-American with parents who immigrated from India. My parents avoided assimilation with American culture as much as possible and raised me around our culture and religious values. One of the practices of my religion is maintaining a lacto-vegetarian diet. As a child, all I knew was to check 2 things before eating something: no eggs or meat. But I had never comprehended seeing or smelling a meat product.

At my elementary school, in 6th you attend the infamous camping trip. It took a lot of convincing to let me go, since I had never eaten or slept anywhere other than my home, apart from visits to extended family who shared the same cultural and religious values.

Preparing for my field trip, I wrote on the permission slip about my dietary restriction. Arriving at camp, I reminded my teacher about my dietary restriction, and she affirmed she’d let the cafeteria staff know. Despite this, when the staff was serving food on each of our plates, they filled half my plate with orange chicken and walked away. The smell was unsettling, and I felt hurt for being ignored. I looked around me, and not seeing my family there to advocate on my behalf, I got scared and started tearing up.

It took me back to when I was in preschool, not sure if I could eat peanut butter since we never had it at home. I was so scared that I started crying, and my dad came to school to comfort me and explain my dietary restrictions.

In the “participant stage” of culture shock, you’re forced to engage with a new setting and may experience some frustrations. I felt like my personal bubble was violated; forced to engage with its smell and appearance. But as I grew older, I moved past these initial frustrations and began eating meals with friends from all types of cultures. Thus, entering the “final stage”, where adjustment is near complete and the new customs are acknowledged. Through these friendships and meals, I stepped into that final stage.

My anxiety and unease about being around meat have faded. Navigating friendships with different cultures pushed me out of my comfort zone and exposed me to different experiences and mindsets. Balancing my strong culture and that of those around me has shaped me into an adaptable person, which I’m proud of.

Anamika Bawa, California Community College Transfer Student

Most models of culture shock end here, but Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) were mindful to explore what happens to travelers when they return home. The final three stages are often overlooked and can be equally challenging. The **Ambivalence stage** mirrors the preparation stage and reflects a period of mixed emotions before returning home, characterized by grief, nostalgia for the host culture, and a sense of relief and sorrow. Once you actually head home, you may find yourself in **Reentry Shock**, where the individual experiences culture shock upon returning to their home culture, finding it difficult to readjust and feeling like a stranger. What can happen is that you find you have changed because of your experience, but the people you are close to may not see the changes. You may even find that the way you view life at home has changed, and you may want to keep some of the new cultural practices you learned when you return home. Many travelers find it challenging to share their experiences, but others do not have the same interest or passion for their experiences. The final stage of adaptation is **resocialization**, where the individual adjusts back to their home culture, integrating new perspectives and experiences into their life.

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7.4: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills to Manage Culture Shock



Figure 7.4.1: The Dalai Lama greeting US President Obama

Whether you are traveling overseas for work or transferring to a new college across the country, it helps to prepare yourself to manage the inevitable feelings of culture shock. The photo above—President Obama greeting the Dalai Lama—captures a moment of mutual respect across cultures, reminding us that even high-profile leaders navigate unfamiliar customs and perspectives with grace. Review the tips below to help you prepare in advance and manage feelings of discomfort associated with culture shock.

Understand that Culture Shock Exists: One of the best remedies for managing culture shock starts with simply understanding that culture shock exists. Culture shock can catch us by surprise. We feel emotions that we don't expect or are novel to us. When we **realize that culture shock exists**, we have an explanation for the emotional turmoil caused by culture shock. If we don't know about culture shock, we are left wondering, "What's happening to me," which can be profoundly unsettling.

Learn about the New Culture in Advance: Culture shock, by definition, is the stress and anxiety we experience when we are in unfamiliar territory. Therefore, if we **learn more about the host country**, we may begin to have an understanding of the different norms and customs in our new environment. If we know we will be traveling, we should do our homework. There are countless guidebooks and websites that discuss different cultural tendencies exhibited by people of different nations. For example, culturereadу.org has country-specific information on greetings, communication style, gender issues, law and order, dress, socializing, business basics, and gift giving, to name just a few.

Learn Key Phrases: When travelling, it can be extremely helpful to know some key words and phrases to help you navigate the new culture. Words and phrases such as “hello”, “thank you”, “where is…”, and “help” can all be extremely helpful in the moment. Not only does this help your comfort level, but knowing a few key phrases demonstrates to locals that you care to learn a little about their language and culture. Beyond that, technology is our friend, and tools such as Google Translate can help us navigate our new surroundings.

Develop Relationships: A common coping mechanism when confronting culture shock is to turn inward and isolate oneself from the host culture. Some people may choose to stay in their rooms all day instead of interacting with others. A better approach is to **develop friendships** or acquaintances with the locals. To illustrate, in Chengdu, China, there are certain locations called *English corners*, where people gather to practice English. Visiting American students who go to the English corners are surrounded by local Chinese people who invite them to their homes, take them out for meals, and show them the hidden jewels of the city that they otherwise may never encounter.

Student Voice

In my opinion, culture shock can be experienced even without crossing any international borders. My experience with culture shock happened without even leaving my home state of California. I grew up in a predominantly Latinx community in East Los Angeles where my high school was 98% Latinx. This culturally homogeneous environment shaped my expectations for social interactions. I lived in a reality where my identity was the default, Spanish was spoken as freely as English, and our high-context communication style meant that cultural cues, such as food or family dynamics, were always understood without explanation.

When I transferred to UC San Diego (UCSD), that protective bubble was shattered. I was suddenly placed into an environment where the Latinx population made up less than 20% of the total student body. This drastic demographic shift triggered an intense period of culture shock. I began to feel anxious, isolated, and disoriented, feelings which I later realized were a part of the Affective dimension of the ABC model of Culture Shock, which describes the emotional toll of adapting to a new environment. While walking into large lecture halls with over 300 students, I experienced the Cognitive dissonance of being an outsider in a space that was supposed to be my new home. I just didn't miss my old friends; I missed my protective cultural bubble where I didn't have to explain or perform my identity.

For the first few weeks, I was stuck in the “Crisis” stage of the W-Curve Adjustment Model. I began questioning my decision to attend UCSD and I felt like I didn't belong. However, looking back through the lens of Kim's Stress Adaptation-Growth Model, I now see this stress as a necessary catalyst. It forced me to stop being passive and start searching for connections. This adjustment phase began when I discovered cultural centers such as M.E.Ch.A (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan) and the Raza Resource Centro.

I was venturing through a massive and diverse campus where I felt invisible and disconnected. This was until I accidentally stumbled upon the Raza Resource Centro, a cultural resource center I didn’t even know existed. Walking through the doors, I was met with the inviting smell of warm pan dulce and the familiar sound of Vicente Fernandez playing softly in the background. This provided the "cultural mirror" I had lost. Finding this space, alongside organizations such as M.E.Ch.A didn’t just offer friends; it reassured me and offered validation for my cultural identity This experience taught me that culture shock isn't just about geography; it’s about belonging. Overcoming this challenge was never about assimilating with UCSD's dominant culture, it was about integrating into it and finding spaces that allowed me to fully be myself while succeeding in a new environment. To other students facing a similar situation, I would say: feeling isolated is a normal part of the process, and finding your community is key to turning those feelings into growth!

Daniel Oritiz, California Community College Student

Balance Familiarity and Exploration: Life in the new culture may feel more comfortable if you find a way to strike a balance between familiarity and exploration. Pursuing your existing interests, like finding a local gym if you're into fitness, can create a comforting routine and help you feel grounded in a new environment. At the same time, diving into new experiences, such as taking a cooking class on local cuisine, opens the door to cultural connection and personal growth. This blend of the known and the novel helps build confidence, fosters meaningful relationships, and transforms the unfamiliar into something exciting and enriching.

Learn to Tolerate Ambiguity: When we enter an unfamiliar culture, we confront situations that we just don't understand. We may not understand the language people use when speaking to us. We might not understand the behavior of the locals, the significance of ceremonies, etc. To better manage culture shock, we need to **learn to tolerate ambiguity**. You can frustrate yourself to no end if you need to have explanations for everything happening all around you, all the time. By tolerating ambiguity, we become more comfortable with knowing that there is so much happening that we just don't understand, and that's okay. Intercultural communication Professor Tom Grothe notes that one of his “favorite examples comes from traveling in rural Tibet. It was common for children to approach me and stick out their tongues at first greeting. I had no idea why this kept happening to me. Later, I learned that this was a common greeting. According to Tibetan folklore, a cruel ninth-century Tibetan king had a black tongue, so people stuck out their tongues to show that they were not like him (and aren't his reincarnation).”

Reduce Uncertainty: humans have a natural desire to reduce uncertainty in any given situation. When traveling through unfamiliar cultures, the increased levels of uncertainty can leave people feeling insecure. This insecurity is often projected outward and can manifest in disparaging the norms of the host culture. It is easy to compare our home culture with the unknown, and this can lead to ethnocentric thinking. Ethnocentrism is the tendency to evaluate other groups according to the values and standards of one's own ethnic group, especially with the conviction that one's own ethnic group is superior to the other groups (dictionary.com). The

best advice for managing culture shock is to be mindful of ethnocentrism and **suspend ethnocentric evaluations**.



Figure 7.4.2: Outdoor market in Chengdu, China (CC BY; Tom Grothe)

Spotlight on Social Media

Imagine landing in a new country, your brain buzzing with jet lag and your heart racing from unfamiliar sights, sounds, and social norms. Culture shock is real—but guess what? Your phone might just be your secret weapon. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Reddit can help bridge cultural gaps by offering instant access to local trends, language tips, and even memes that decode social behavior. According to Fioravanti et al. (2021), social media can ease the transition by fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. Roberts and David (2019) also found that social media intensity can positively impact social connection, especially when users engage with culturally relevant content. But before you scroll your way to cultural enlightenment, beware of the dark side: FOMO. The fear of missing out can creep in when you see friends back home living their best lives without you. A scoping review by Groenestein et al. (2024) highlights how FOMO can negatively affect psychological well-being, especially when digital comparisons become constant. So yes, social media can be a lifeline—but use it wisely. Stay curious, stay grounded, and remember: your journey is uniquely yours, not just a highlight reel.

Questions for Reflection:

1. **Have you ever used social media to learn about a new culture—maybe through food videos, travel vlogs, or memes? What did you discover, and how did it shape your understanding? Think about a time when social media made you feel more connected—or more left out. What helped you stay grounded in your own experience?**
2. **If you were landing in a new country tomorrow, which social media platform would you turn to first—and what would you hope to find there?**

Contributions and Attributions

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7.5: Conclusion

Culture shock can be stressful. Our attitude can profoundly influence our experience. To manage that stress, we need to cultivate a positive attitude. We can't always change our environment, but we can change how we react to it. It's important to **have faith in yourself, in the essential goodwill of your hosts, and in the positive outcome of the experience.** Not everybody is out to get you. If someone laughs, it doesn't mean they are laughing at you. Of course, we need to be careful when traveling abroad, but we don't need to be afraid. The most enriching experiences don't come from visiting historical landmarks; they come from deep, authentic connections we make with people along the way.

The International Institute for Peace through Tourism offers great attitudinal advice in the *Credo of the Peaceful Traveler*:

> Grateful for the opportunity to travel and experience the world, and because peace begins with the individual, I affirm my personal responsibility and commitment to:
>
> Journey with an open mind and gentle heart
>
> Accept with grace and gratitude the diversity I encounter
>
> Revere and protect the natural environment which sustains all life
>
> Appreciate all cultures I discover
>
> Respect and thank my hosts for their welcome
>
> Offer my hand in friendship to everyone I meet
>
> Support travel services that share these views and act upon them and,
>
> By my spirit, words and actions, encourage others to travel the world in peace

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8: PERCEPTIONS AND BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

8.1: Prejudice and Discrimination in the 21st Century
8.2: Ethnocentrism and Stereotypes
8.3: Prejudice and Discrimination
8.4: Racism and Privilege
8.5: Toolkit for Responding to Barriers in Communication
8.6: Conclusion

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8.1: Prejudice and Discrimination in the 21st Century

Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend. — Martin Luther King Jr.

We belong to each other. — Mother Teresa

Peace begins with understanding. — Thich Nhat Hanh

Introduction

Most people would like a world rooted in dignity and connection. As the quotes above reflect, noted leaders have acknowledge the importance of human connection for a peaceful existence. Yet, despite a desire for improved relationships with people who may at first glance appear different from ourselves, Americans are not perceiving improvements in race relations in the United States.

According to research from the Pew Institute (2025) found that the majority of Americans recognize that discrimination exists in the United States, especially in the areas of policing, housing, and medical care. Furthermore, Americans report that their perceptions of racism and discrimination have increased since 2016 (Pew Research Center, 2019). While there are many reasons for the increased perceptions of racism and discrimination in society (social media, politics, hate crimes, etc), sadly one of the best predictors of attitutudes about this issue has become a persons political party (Pew Research Center, 2025).

In this chapter, we will explore different barriers to intercultural communication, including prejudice, discrimination, racism, privilege, ethnocentrism, and stereotypes. We will end the chapter with Growing Your Intercultural Skills and a specific focus on how to use communication not only for self-reflection, but to respond appropriately, effectively, and safely when confronted with bias in communication.

First, read on for some examples of discrimination impacting well-known public figures.

Who Experienced This?

Prejudice and discrimination show up in many forms—sometimes subtle, sometimes painfully direct. Below are real incidents involving well-known public figures. See if you can identify who experienced each one before checking the answers at the bottom of the page.

Can You Guess Who...?

- Black/African American
    - This world-famous media icon visited a luxury boutique in Switzerland and was denied the chance to view a high-end handbag.
    - The sales associate insisted it was “too expensive” and pushed cheaper items instead.
    - The incident sparked international discussion about racial profiling in retail spaces.
- Asian/Asian American
    - This rising actor from the Star Wars franchise endured a wave of racist and sexist online harassment.
    - Trolls edited her online profiles with slurs targeting her ethnicity.
    - The hostility eventually drove her off social media and inspired a powerful essay about self-worth.
- Latino/Hispanic

    - This award-winning Latina performer was told early in her career to “sound more Latina,” despite not having the accent casting directors expected.
    - She was once denied a role because the production had already cast one Latino actor.
    - Her experiences highlight tokenism and stereotyping in the entertainment industry.

- Middle Eastern/South Asian
    - This acclaimed actor has spoken openly about being repeatedly profiled at airports.
    - He was once detained and questioned despite returning from a professional achievement abroad.
    - He described the experience as being forced to wear a “chain of labels.”

- Multiracial Families
    - This high-profile mother recounted a disturbing incident on a flight where a passenger shouted racial slurs at her toddler.
    - The attack targeted both the child’s identity and the mother’s interracial marriage.
    - The moment underscored how prejudice can harm even the youngest members of society.

Answer Key

- Oprah Winfrey
- Kelly Marie Tran
- America Ferrera
- Riz Ahmed
- Kim Kardashian and North West

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8.2: Ethnocentrism and Stereotypes

Cultural Connections: The Accent Paradox

When I tell people, “English is my second language,” they often smile and say, “Wow! But you don’t have an accent!” I know they mean it as a compliment, and I appreciate the kindness - but it always makes me pause. I usually smile and say thanks, but it does make me wonder - is having an accent seen as something negative? Is speaking “without” an accent an accomplishment to be celebrated? Comments like that remind me that stereotypes and hidden biases can sneak into even the friendliest conversations. They shape how people see us before they really know us, and that can create barriers to genuine understanding.

Barriers to intercultural communication aren’t always loud or obvious. Sometimes, they show up in a single sentence, a glance, or a policy. This chapter explores how **ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination,** and **racism** shape the way we speak, listen, and relate to one another - and how recognizing these barriers is the first step toward dismantling them. These next three sections - Ethnocentrism and Stereotypes, Prejudice and Discrimination, and Racism and Privilege - represent a continuum of bias and power that escalates from internal perception to external behavior to systemic inequality. Each section will build on the previous as “nested layers.”

- Ethnocentrism and stereotypes shape how we see others.
- Prejudice and discrimination shape how we treat others.
- Racism and privilege shape the environment in which communication occurs.

Ethnocentrism and Stereotypes

Ethnocentrism

Where did you start reading on this page? The top left corner. Why not the bottom right corner, or the top right one? In English we read left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom. But not everyone reads the same. If you read and write Arabic or Hebrew, you will proceed from right to left. Neither is right or wrong, simply different. Americans tend to say that people from England drive on the “wrong” side of the road, rather than on the “other” side. You may find it hard to drive on the other side of the road while visiting England, but for people in the United Kingdom, it is normal and natural. Often, people in the United States express disgust at other cultures’ cuisine and think that it’s gross to eat meat from a dog or guinea pig, for example, while they don’t question their own habit of eating cows or pigs. Such attitudes are an example of **ethnocentrism,** placing one’s own culture and the corresponding beliefs, values, and behaviors in the center; in a position where it is seen as normal and right, and evaluating all other cultural systems against it. A good example of ethnocentrism is referring to parts of Asia as the "Far East." One might question, "Far east of where?" Ethnocentrism shows up in large and small ways: the WWII Nazi’s elevation of the Aryan race and the corresponding killing of Jews, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, and other non Aryan groups is one of the most horrific ethnocentric acts in history. However, ethnocentrism shows up in small and seemingly unconscious ways as well. In American culture, if you decided to serve dog meat as appetizers at your cocktail party you would probably disgust your guests and the police might even arrest you because the consumption of dog meat is not culturally acceptable. However, in China “it is neither rare nor unusual” to consume dog meat (Wingfield-Hayes).

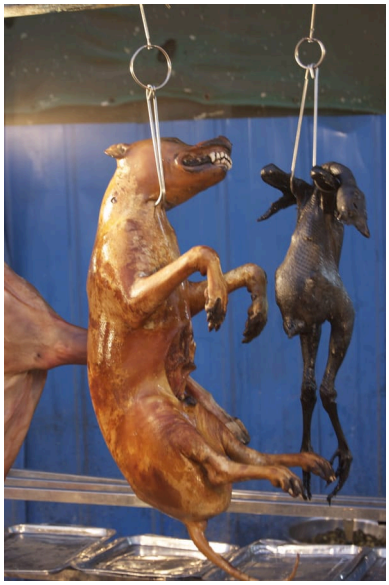


Figure 8.1.1: Cooked dog on a hanger. (By Maria Ly - Flickr: dog on a stick: (CCBY 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index...curid=32815072)

In the Czech Republic, the traditional Christmas dinner is carp and potato salad. Imagine how your family might react if you told them you were serving carp and potato salad for Christmas. In the Czech Republic, it is a beautiful tradition, but in America, it might not receive a warm welcome. Our cultural background influences every aspect of our lives from the food we consume to the classroom. Ethnocentrism is likely to show up in Literature classes as well. Cultural bias dictates which “great works” students are going to read and study in the classroom. More often than not, these works represent the given culture (i.e., reading French authors in France and Korean authors in Korea). In this case, ethnocentrism can be difficult to identify, as it just seems "normal." This is also the case with how the world is introduced to us via maps. The map below is similar to the map of the world introduced to me in school. I never questioned why Asia was cut in half and my country was in the middle of the map.



Figure 8.1.2: World map with USA in the middle (public domain - Wikimedia Commons)

The Greenland Problem

In the field of geography there has been an ongoing debate about the use of a Mercator map versus a Peter’s Projection map. The arguments reveal cultural biases toward the Northern, industrialized nations. This is also known as the “Greenland Problem,” which refers to the widespread misconceptions caused by the **Mercator projection**, a map design introduced in 1569 for navigational purposes. While useful for plotting straight-line courses, the Mercator map distorts the relative size of land

masses, especially those close to the North and South Poles. Consequently, countries like Greenland look disproportionately large - often seen as about the same size as Africa. In reality, Africa is about 14 times larger than Greenland (ScienceABC, 2023). These distortions reinforce **Eurocentric biases**, making northern countries appear more dominant and the Global South less imposing (Bullock, Calendar, & Alvarez, 2023).

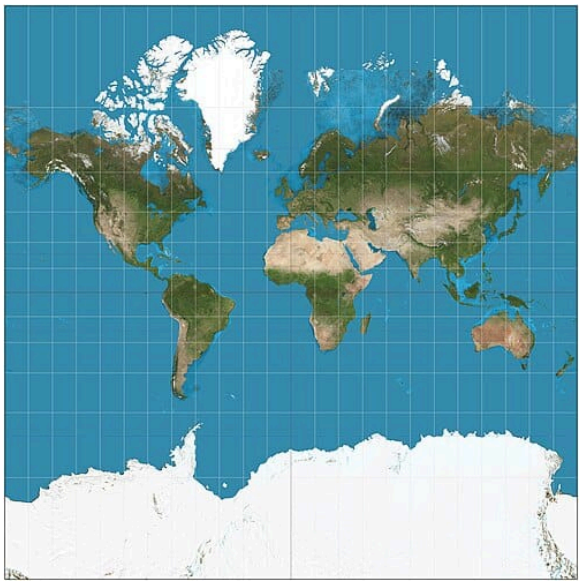


Figure 8.1.3: **The Mercator projection**. Wikimedia Commons

Feature or Region	Map Misconceptions (Mercator Projection)	Map Realities (Gall-Peters Projection)
Greenland vs. Africa	Greenland appears nearly the same size as Africa	Africa is about **14 times larger** than Greenland (ScienceABC, 2023)
Alaska vs. Continental U.S.	Alaska looks almost as large as the lower 48 states	Alaska can fit into the continental U.S. about **three times**
Europe vs. South America	Europe (excluding Russia) appears slightly larger than South America	South America is nearly **twice the size** of Europe
Antarctica	Appears massive, dominating the map	Accurately shown as the **fifth-largest continent**, smaller than Asia, Africa, North America, and South America
Global North vs. Global South	Northern countries appear disproportionately large, reinforcing Eurocentric bias	Global South shown as **38.6 million sq mi** vs. **18.9 million sq mi** in the Global North (Bullock et al., 2023)
Visual Emphasis	Prioritizes shape and direction, distorting area—favored for navigation	Preserves **area accurately**, revealing true proportions of continents and countries
Cultural Impact	Reinforces dominance of Europe and North America visually	Challenges bias, promotes geographic equity and awareness of developing regions

Table 8.1.1: Map Misconceptions vs. Map Realities

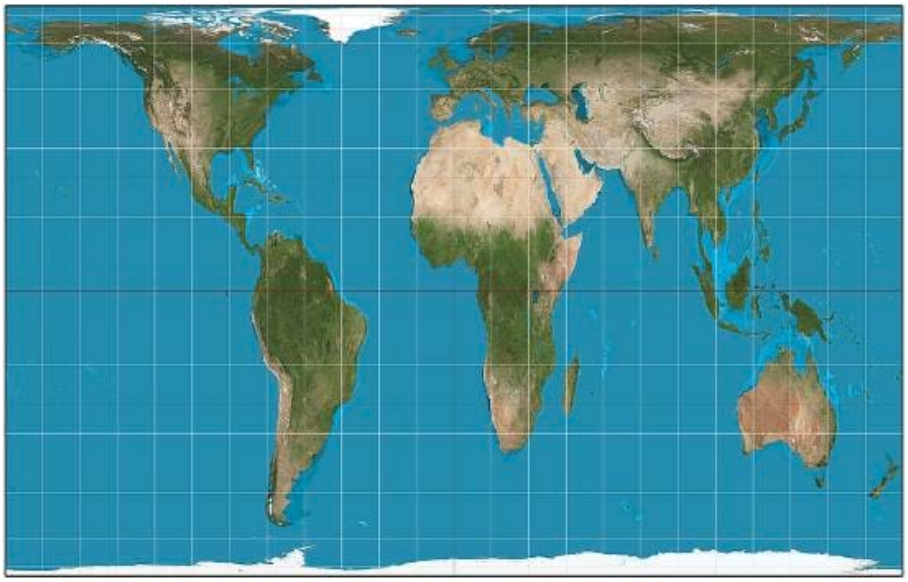


Figure 8.1.4: **The Gall-Peters projection.** Wikimedia Commons

A high level of appreciation for one's own culture can be healthy; a shared sense of community pride, for example, connects people in a society. But ethnocentrism can lead to disdain or dislike for other cultures and could cause misunderstanding and conflict. People with the best intentions sometimes travel to a society to "help" its people, because they see them as uneducated or backward —essentially inferior. In reality, these travelers are guilty of **cultural imperialism**, the ethnocentric imposition of one's own cultural values on another culture. Europe's colonial expansion, begun in the sixteenth century, was often accompanied by severe cultural imperialism. European colonizers often viewed the people in the lands they colonized as uncultured savages who were in need of European governance, dress, religion, and other cultural practices. A more modern example of cultural imperialism may include the work of international aid agencies who introduce agricultural methods and plant species from developed countries while overlooking indigenous varieties and agricultural approaches that are better suited to the particular region. To dismantle ethnocentrism, we must recognize that our views of the world, what we consider right and wrong, normal or weird, are largely influenced by our cultural standpoint, and that our cultural standpoint is not everyone's cultural standpoint. This ethnocentric bias has received some challenge recently in United States' schools as teachers make efforts to create a multicultural classroom by incorporating books, short stories, and traditions from non-dominant groups.

Cultural Close-up: Remapping the World - Boston's Bold Move Toward Geographic Equity

In 2017, Boston Public Schools became the first major U.S. school district to officially adopt the Gall-Peters projection in social studies classrooms, replacing the widely used Mercator Map (Crew, 2017; Doran, 2017). The shift was part of a broader effort to "decolonize" the curriculum and offer students a more equitable view of global geography. Unlike the Mercator projection - which exaggerates the size of Europe and North America - the Gall-Peters map presents landmasses in proportion to their actual area, giving greater visual prominence to regions like Africa and South America (Crew, 217).

Teachers in grades 2, 7, and 11 reported that students reacted with surprise and curiosity, often questioning prior assumptions about the world's layout (Crew, 2017). The initiative aligns with global movements advocating for less Eurocentric representations in education, including support from the United Nations and various aid organizations (Crew, 2017).

Despite its advantages in size accuracy, the Gall-Peters projection has faced criticism for distorting the shapes of continents. Cartographers argue that no single map can perfectly represent a spherical Earth on a flat surface, and suggest that students benefit most from exposure to multiple projections (Doran, 2017).

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does map distortion matter? How can maps influence our worldview?
2. How might the Mercator map reinforce colonial perspectives? What messages does it send about global power and importance?

3. What are some of the pros and cons of using the Gall-Peters projection in classrooms? Should students be exposed to multiple map types? Why or why not?

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Stereotypes

Just as ethnocentrism is rooted in our perception of the world around us, so too are stereotypes. In fact, stereotypes are activated out of the perception process. **Perception** is the process of selecting stimuli from our environment, categorizing that stimuli, and then interpreting it. Stereotypes are rigid categorizations of people based on their group affiliation. We stereotype people because it streamlines the perception process. Once we've categorized a person as a member of a particular group, we can form a quick impression of them (Macrae et al., 1999). When we stereotype others, we replace human complexities of personality with broad assumptions about character and worth based on social group affiliation. We stereotype people in the perception process to help us make sense out of our world, which might be efficient for communication, but frequently leads us to form flawed impressions.

As stated above, **stereotypes are oversimplified** ideas about groups of people. Stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation — almost any characteristic. They may be positive, but when combined with an ethnocentric perspective, are often negative (usually toward other groups, such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a subordinate racial group is stupid or lazy). In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn't take individual differences into account.

Although in some cases the stereotypes that are used to make judgments might actually be true of the individual being judged, in many other cases they are not. **Stereotypes are overgeneralized** and applied to all members of a group. Stereotyping is problematic when the stereotypes we hold about a social group are inaccurate overall, and particularly when they do not apply to the individual who is being judged (Stangor, 1995). For example, someone holding prejudiced attitudes toward older adults, may believe that older adults are slow and incompetent (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005; Nelson, 2004). We cannot possibly know each individual person of advanced age to know that all older adults are slow and incompetent. Therefore, this negative belief is overgeneralized to all members of the group, even though many of the individual group members may in fact be spry and intelligent. Another example of a well-known stereotype involves beliefs about racial differences among athletes. As Hodge, Burden, Robinson, and Bennett (2008) point out, Black male athletes are often believed to be more athletic, yet less intelligent, than their White male counterparts. These beliefs persist despite a number of high profile examples to the contrary. Sadly, such beliefs often influence how these athletes are treated by others and how they view themselves and their own capabilities.

Where do stereotypes come from? New stereotypes are rarely created; rather, they are recycled from subordinate groups that have assimilated into society and are reused to describe newly subordinate groups. For example, many stereotypes that are currently used to characterize black people were used earlier in American history to characterize Irish and eastern European immigrants. Once they become established, stereotypes (like any other cognitive representation) tend to persevere. We begin to respond to members of stereotyped categories as if we already knew what they were like.

These persistent and overgeneralized beliefs do more than shape our initial impressions - they also influence intercultural interactions in profound ways. When we rely on rigid group-based assumptions, we risk misinterpreting others' behaviors, values, and intentions, especially across cultural boundaries. Stereotypes can act as filters that distort communication, leading to misunderstandings, reduced empathy, and missed opportunities for genuine connection. In intercultural contexts, these assumptions often reinforce power imbalances and inhibit curiosity about others' lived experiences. To better understand how stereotypes affect communication, we examine key concepts such as confirmation bias, self-fulfilling prophecy, and the stereotype effect - each of which reveals how our expectations and perceptions can shape, and sometimes limit, our intercultural encounters.

Confirmation Bias

Stereotypes are maintained because information that confirms our stereotypes is better remembered than information that disconfirms them. In this process, known as **confirmation bias**, we seek out information that supports our stereotypes and ignore information that is inconsistent with our stereotypes (Fyock & Stangor, 1994). If we believe that women are bad drivers and we see a woman driving poorly, then we tend to remember it, but when we see a woman who drives particularly well, we tend to forget it. When we confirm our biases, we tend to perceive the world in ways that make it fit our existing beliefs, rather than changing our beliefs to fit the reality around us. Because they are so highly cognitively accessible, and because they seem so "right," our stereotypes easily influence our judgments of and responses to those we have categorized. This tendency to favor stereotype-confirming information creates a powerful barrier to intercultural communication, as it limits our ability to engage openly, interpret others accurately, and revise our assumptions in light of new cultural experiences.

Stereotypes and Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

When we hold a stereotype about a person, we have expectations that he or she will fulfill that stereotype. **A self-fulfilling prophecy** is an expectation held by a person that alters his or her behavior in a way that tends to make it true. When we hold stereotypes about a person, we tend to treat the person according to our expectations. This treatment can influence the person to act according to our stereotypic expectations, thus confirming our stereotypic beliefs. Once we believe that men make better leaders than women, we tend to behave toward men in ways that make it easier for them to lead. And we behave toward women in ways that make it more difficult for them to lead. The result? Men find it easier to excel in leadership positions, whereas women have to work hard to overcome the false beliefs about their lack of leadership abilities (Phelan & Rudman, 2010). Self-fulfilling prophecies are ubiquitous—even teachers' expectations about their students' academic abilities can influence the students' school performance (Jussim, Robustelli, & Cain, 2009). Research by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to perform well had higher grades than disadvantaged students whose teachers expected them to do poorly.

Consider this example of cause and effect in a self-fulfilling prophecy: If an employer expects an openly gay male job applicant to be incompetent, the potential employer might treat the applicant negatively during the interview by engaging in less conversation, making little eye contact, and generally behaving coldly toward the applicant (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). In turn, the job applicant will perceive that the potential employer dislikes him, and he will respond by giving shorter responses to interview questions, making less eye contact, and generally disengaging from the interview. After the interview, the employer will reflect on the applicant's behavior, which seemed cold and distant, and the employer will conclude, based on the applicant's poor performance during the interview, that the applicant was in fact incompetent. Thus, the employer's stereotype—gay men are incompetent and do not make good employees—is reinforced. Do you think this job applicant is likely to be hired?

Cultural Close-up: Seeing is Believing - And Becoming
Self-Fulfilling Prophecy and Confirmation Bias in Jane Elliott's Classroom

In 1968, educator Jane Elliott conducted a groundbreaking classroom experiment to teach her third-grade students about discrimination. She divided the class by eye color - declaring that blue-eyed children were superior to brown-eyed children. Within hours, students internalized these labels: blue-eyed children became more confident and assertive, while brown-eyed children grew withdrawn and hesitant (Peters, 1987).

This experiment vividly illustrates the power of the **self-fulfilling prophecy** - the idea that expectations about a person or group can influence behavior in ways that make those expectations come true (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). When students were told they were inferior, they performed worse academically and socially, not because of ability, but because they believed the label.

It also demonstrates **confirmation bias** - the tendency to notice and remember information that supports existing beliefs while ignoring contradictory evidence (Fyock & Stangor, 1994). Elliott's students quickly began to interpret behaviors through the lens of superiority or inferiority, reinforcing the arbitrary division.

In intercultural communication, these biases can shape how we perceive others across cultural lines. If we expect someone from a different background to be less competent or less friendly, we may unconsciously treat them in ways that elicit those very behaviors - reinforcing our original assumptions.

Elliott's experiment remains a powerful reminder that when we label others, we don't just describe them, we shape their reality.



Figure 8.2.1: Jane Elliott and her 3rd graders (Click on image for full video)

Discussion Questions:

1. How did Jane Elliott's experiment demonstrate the power of social labeling in shaping behavior and self-perception? How might similar dynamics play out in intercultural classrooms, workplaces, or media representations?
2. What role does confirmation bias play in reinforcing stereotypes, even when evidence contradicts them? How can we challenge these biases in everyday interactions?
3. How might self-fulfilling prophecies affect marginalized groups' access to opportunity, voice, and belonging? What strategies can educators and leaders use to disrupt these cycles and foster more inclusive environments?

References:

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Peters, W. (Writer & Director). (1987). A class divided [Documentary]. Yale University Films. view source(opens in new window)

Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). Pygmalion in the classroom: Teacher expectation and pupils' intellectual development. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

The Stereotype Effect

Our stereotypes influence not only our judgments of others but also our beliefs about ourselves, and even our own performance on important tasks. In some cases, these beliefs may be positive, and they have the effect of making us feel more confident and thus better able to perform tasks. This effect is called **stereotype lift**. Because Asian students are aware of the stereotype that "Asians are good at math," reminding them of this fact before they take a difficult math test can improve their performance on the test (Walton & Cohen, 2003). On the other hand, sometimes these beliefs are negative, and they create negative self-fulfilling prophecies such that we perform more poorly just because of our knowledge about the stereotypes. This latter effect is called **stereotype threat**.

Research has found that the experience of stereotype threat can help explain a wide variety of performance decrements among those who are targeted by negative stereotypes. For instance, Black students perform more poorly on standardized tests, receive lower grades, and are less likely to remain in school in comparison with White students, even when other factors such as family income, parents' education, and other relevant variables are controlled. Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995) tested the hypothesis that these differences might be due to the activation of negative stereotypes, prompting stereotype threat. Because Black students are aware of the (inaccurate) stereotype that "Blacks are intellectually inferior to Whites," this stereotype might create a negative expectation, which might interfere with their performance on intellectual tests through fear of confirming that stereotype.

In support of this hypothesis, Steele and Aronson's research revealed that Black college students performed worse (in comparison with their prior test scores) on math questions taken from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) when the test was described to them as being "diagnostic of their mathematical ability" (and thus when the stereotype was relevant) but that their performance was not influenced when the same questions were framed as "an exercise in problem solving." And in another study, Steele and Aronson found that when Black students were asked to indicate their race before they took a math test (again activating the stereotype), they performed more poorly than they had on prior exams, whereas the scores of White students were not affected by first indicating their race.

Steele and Aronson argued that thinking about negative stereotypes that are relevant to a task that one is performing creates stereotype threat. That is, they argued that the negative impact of race on standardized tests may be caused, at least in part, by knowledge of relevant cultural stereotypes. Because the threat is "in the air," Black students may be negatively influenced by it. Even groups who typically enjoy advantaged social status can be made to experience stereotype threat. White men performed more poorly on a math test when they were told that their performance would be compared with that of Asian men (Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keough, & Steele, 1999), and Whites performed more poorly than Blacks on a sport-related task when it was described to them as measuring their natural athletic ability (Stone, 2002).

Stereotype threat is created in situations that pose a significant threat to self-concern, such that our perceptions of ourselves as important, valuable, and capable individuals are threatened. In these situations, there is a discrepancy between our positive concept of our skills and abilities and the negative stereotypes suggesting poor performance. When our stereotypes lead us to believe that we are likely to perform poorly on a task, we experience a feeling of unease and status threat. Research has found that stereotype threat is caused by both cognitive and affective factors. On the cognitive side, individuals who are experiencing stereotype threat show an impairment in cognitive processing that is caused by increased vigilance toward the environment and attempts to suppress their stereotypical thoughts. On the affective side, stereotype threat creates stress as well as a variety of affective responses including anxiety (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008).

Stereotype threat is not, however, absolute—we can get past it if we try. What is important is to reduce the self-concern that is engaged when we consider the relevant negative stereotypes. Manipulations that affirm positive characteristics about oneself or one's group are successful at reducing stereotype threat (Alter, Aronson, Darley, Rodriguez, & Ruble, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2003; McIntyre, Paulson, & Lord, 2003). In fact, just knowing that stereotype threat exists and may influence performance can help alleviate its negative impact (Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005).

In the end, stereotypes are difficult to change and stereotyping is almost impossible to avoid. They are frequently expressed on TV, in movies, in chat rooms and blogs, and in conversations with friends and family. Further, research has found that stereotypes are often used out of our awareness, which makes it very difficult for us to correct them. Even when we think we are being completely fair, we may nevertheless be using our stereotypes to condone discrimination (Chen & Bargh, 1999). And when we are distracted or under time pressure, these tendencies become even more powerful (Stangor & Duan, 1991). Still, it's crucial to keep in mind that just because someone belongs to a certain group, it doesn't necessarily mean that all of the defining characteristics of that group apply to that person. Treating individuals according to rigid stereotypic beliefs is detrimental to all aspects of the communication process and can lead to prejudice and discrimination.

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8.3: Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice is a negative attitude and feeling toward an individual based solely on one's membership in a particular social group, such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, religion, sexual orientation, profession, and many more (Allport, 1954; Brown, 2010). An example of prejudice is having a negative attitude toward people who are not born in the United States. Although people holding this prejudiced attitude do not know all people who were not born in the United States, they dislike them due to their status as foreigners.

Identifying Prejudice

Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that affect how we perceive and interact with others, often without our awareness (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Because people may be unaware of these biases - or reluctant to admit them - social psychologists have developed indirect methods to study them.

In intercultural contexts, implicit bias can lead to microaggressions: subtle, often unintended slights that communicate exclusion or disrespect (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin., 2007). Though seemingly minor, these moments accumulate over time, undermining trust and reinforcing power imbalances. Addressing implicit bias requires intentional reflection, education, and exposure to diverse perspectives.

Researchers often measure implicit bias through nonverbal behaviors, such as physical distance. For example, participants asked to sit near someone from a different racial group tend to sit farther away if they hold prejudiced attitudes (Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974).

Reaction-time tests also reveal bias. The **Implicit Association Test (IAT)** asks respondents to quickly categorize images and words. When stereotype-consistent pairings (e.g., "men" and "strong") are grouped together, responses are faster and more accurate. When pairings challenge stereotypes (e.g., "women" and "strong"), responses slow and errors increase (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007). These patterns suggest that even individuals who consciously reject prejudice may still hold implicit associations.

Research shows that implicit bias can influence behavior in serious ways. In one study, White participants were more likely to "shoot" unarmed Black targets than White ones in simulated decision-making tasks, revealing how bias can affect split-second judgements (Correll et al., 2007).

Although the IAT and similar tools have sparked debate (Tetlock & Mitchell, 2008), they consistently show that stereotypes are easily activated and can shape behavior - even when people intend to be fair (Barden, Maddux, Petty, & Brewer, 2004).

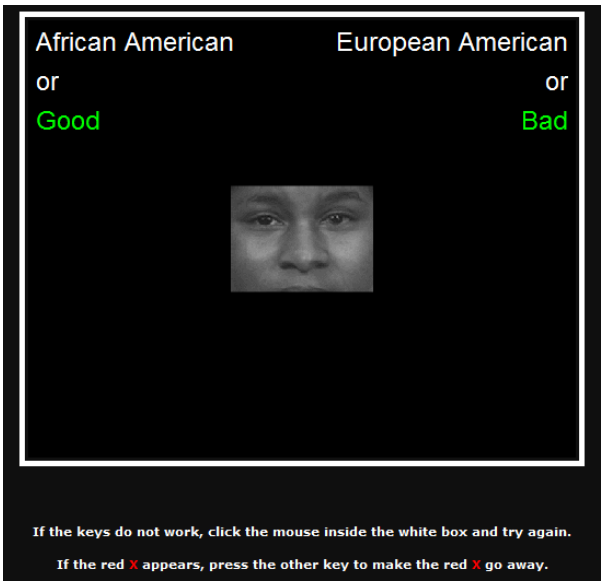


Figure 8.2.1: An actual screenshot from an IAT (Implicit Association Test) that is designed to test a person's reaction time (measured in milliseconds) to an array of stimuli that are presented on the screen. This particular item is testing an individual's unconscious reaction towards members of various ethnic groups. [Image: Courtesy of Anthony Greenwald from Project Implicit]

Explaining Prejudice

As discussed previously in this section, we all belong to a gender, race, age, and social economic group. These groups provide a powerful source of our identity and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These groups serve as our ingroups. An **ingroup** is a group that we identify with or see ourselves as belonging to. A group that we don't belong to, or an **outgroup**, is a group that we view as fundamentally different from us. For example, if you are female, your gender ingroup includes all females, and your gender outgroup includes all males. People often view gender groups as being fundamentally different from each other in personality traits, characteristics, social roles, and interests. Perceiving others as members of ingroups or outgroups is one of the most important perceptual distinctions that we make. We often feel strongly connected to our ingroups, especially when they are centrally tied to our identities and culture. Because we often feel a strong sense of belonging and emotional connection to our ingroups, we develop **ingroup favoritism**—the tendency to respond more positively to people from our ingroups than we do to people from outgroups.

People also make trait attributions in ways that benefit their ingroups, just as they make trait attributions that benefit themselves. This general tendency, known as the **ultimate attribution error**, results in the tendency for each of the competing groups to perceive the other group extremely and unrealistically negatively (Hewstone, 1990). When an ingroup member engages in a positive behavior, we tend to see it as a stable internal characteristic of the group as a whole. Similarly, negative behaviors on the part of the outgroup are seen as caused by stable negative group characteristics. On the other hand, negative behaviors from the ingroup and positive behaviors from the outgroup are more likely to be seen as caused by temporary situational variables or by behaviors of specific individuals and are less likely to be attributed to the group. For example, if your friend (someone you perceive as part of your ingroup) does well on an exam, you might account for that by stating that your friend is smart and studied well for the exam. But if someone who you consider as part of your outgroup, such as an international student, does well on an exam, then the reason attributed is that the subject matter is easy, or the professor gives easy exams. Similarly, if your friend does poorly on an exam, you may blame the difficulty of the subject matter or the professor for making unfair exams. If an international student does poorly on an exam, the tendency is to see it as a group trait (international students tend to do poorly on exams). This ingroup bias can result in prejudice and discrimination because the outgroup is perceived as different and is less preferred than our ingroup.

A personality dimension that relates to the desires to protect and enhance the self and the ingroup and thus also relates to greater ingroup favoritism, and in some cases prejudice toward outgroups, is the personality dimension of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1988). **Authoritarianism** is a personality dimension that characterizes people who prefer things to be simple rather than complex and who tend to hold traditional and conventional values. Authoritarians are ingroup-favoring in part because they have a need to self-enhance and in part because they prefer simplicity and thus find it easy to think simply: "We are all good and they are all less good." Political conservatives tend to show more ingroup favoritism than do political liberals, perhaps because the former are more concerned with protecting the ingroup from

threats posed by others (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Stangor & Leary, 2006). Authoritarian personalities develop in childhood in response to parents who practice harsh discipline. Individuals with authoritarian personalities emphasize such things as obedience to authority, a rigid adherence to rules, and low acceptance of people (outgroups) not like oneself. Many studies find strong racial and ethnic prejudice among such individuals (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). But whether their prejudice stems from their authoritarian personalities or instead from the fact that their parents were probably prejudiced themselves remains an important question.

Developed initially from John Dollard's (1900-1980) frustration-aggression theory, **Scapegoating** is the act of blaming a subordinate group when the dominant group experiences frustration or is blocked from obtaining a goal (Allport, 1954). History provides many examples: The lynchings of African Americans in the South increased when the Southern economy worsened and decreased when the economy improved (Tolnay & Beck, 1995). Similarly, white mob violence against Chinese immigrants in the 1870s began after the railroad construction that employed so many Chinese immigrants slowed and the Chinese began looking for work in other industries. Whites feared that the Chinese would take jobs away from white workers and that their large supply of labor would drive down wages. Their assaults on the Chinese killed several people and prompted the passage by Congress of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that prohibited Chinese immigration (Dinnerstein & Reimers, 2009). An example from the last century is the way that Adolf Hitler was able to use the Jewish people as scapegoats for Germany's social and economic problems. In the United States, many states have enacted laws to disenfranchise immigrants; these laws are popular because they let the dominant group scapegoat a subordinate group. Many minority groups have been scapegoated for a nation's — or an individual's — woes.



Figure 8.2.2: During the 1870s, whites feared that Chinese immigrants would take away their jobs. This fear led to white mob violence against the Chinese and to an act of Congress that prohibited Chinese immigration.
Wikimedia Commons (opens in new window)– public domain.

One popular explanation of prejudice emphasizes conformity and socialization and is called **social learning theory**. In this view, people who are prejudiced are merely conforming to the culture in which they grow up, and prejudice is the result of socialization from parents, peers, the news media, Facebook, and other various aspects of their culture. Supporting this view, studies have found that people tend to become more prejudiced when they move to areas where people are very prejudiced and less prejudiced when they move to locations where people are less prejudiced (Aronson, 2008).

The mass media play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of race and reinforcing prejudice. This influence stems from the persistent tendency to portray people of color - particularly Black Americans - in disproportionately negative light. Such portrayals can validate existing biases or even intensify them (Cox, 2024). Recent studies show that although poverty affects all racial groups, media coverage still overrepresents Black Americans in stories about welfare and crime. A 2023 Pew Research Center survey found that 63% of Black Americans believe news coverage about their communities is more negative than coverage of other groups, and 43% say it significantly reinforces stereotypes (Bauder, 2023). Additionally, Black Americans are often depicted as either victims or perpetrators of crime, with little attention paid to the diversity and nuance within their communities (Whitaker, as cited in Bauder, 2023). Leadership disparities in newsrooms further compound the issue: in 2024, only 29% of top editors in U.S. news outlets were people of color, despite people of color comprising a much larger share of the population (Reuters Institute, 2024). These patterns suggest that media bias is not only persistent but structurally embedded, influencing

how audiences interpret race, poverty, and civic worth.

Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination are often confused, but the basic difference between them is this: prejudice is the attitude, while discrimination is the behavior. Sometimes people will act on their prejudiced attitudes toward a group of people, and this behavior is known as discrimination. More specifically, **discrimination** in this context refers to the arbitrary denial of rights, privileges, and opportunities to members of these groups. The use of the word *arbitrary* emphasizes that these groups are being treated unequally not because of their lack of merit but because of one's membership in a particular group (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). As a result of holding negative beliefs (stereotypes) and negative attitudes (prejudice) about a particular group, people often treat the target of prejudice poorly.

Examples of Discrimination

When we meet strangers we automatically process three pieces of information about them: their race, gender, and age (Ito & Urland, 2003). Why are these aspects of an unfamiliar person so important? Why don't we instead notice whether their eyes are friendly, whether they are smiling, their height, the type of clothes they are wearing? Although these secondary characteristics are important in forming a first impression of a stranger, the social categories of race, gender, and age provide a wealth of information about an individual. This information, however, is based on stereotypes, and prejudice and discrimination often begin in the form of stereotypes.

Racism

Racism is a type of prejudice that is used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others. Racial discrimination is discrimination against an individual based solely on one's membership in a specific racial group (such as toward African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Arab Americans, etc.). For example, Blacks are significantly more likely to have their vehicles searched during traffic stops than Whites, particularly when Blacks are driving in predominately White neighborhoods, (a phenomenon often termed "DWB," or "driving while Black.") (Rojek, Rosenfeld, & Decker, 2012). Mexican Americans and other Latinx groups also are targets of racism from the police and other members of the community. For example, when purchasing items with a personal check, Latinx shoppers are more likely than White shoppers to be asked to show formal identification (Dovidio et al., 2010).

In one case of alleged harassment by the police, several East Haven, Connecticut, police officers were arrested on federal charges due to reportedly continued harassment and brutalization of Latinx people. When the accusations came out, the mayor of East Haven was asked, "What are you doing for the Latino community today?" The Mayor responded, "I might have tacos when I go home, I'm not quite sure yet" ("East Haven Mayor," 2012) This statement undermines the important issue of racial profiling and police harassment of Latinx people, while belittling Latinx culture by emphasizing an interest in a food product stereotypically associated with Latinx people. We will discuss racism in more depth in the next section.

Sexism

Sexism is prejudice and discrimination toward individuals based on their sex. Typically, sexism takes the form of men holding biases against women, but either sex can show sexism toward their own or the other sex. Common forms of sexism in modern society include gender role expectations, such as expecting women to be the caretakers of the household. Sexism also includes people's expectations for how members of a gender group should behave. Women are still widely expected to be friendly, modest, and nurturing, and when they act assertively or self-promote, they often face social penalties for violating these norms (Travis, 2025). Recent research confirms that female job applicants who highlight their achievements are perceived as competent but are also more likely to be disliked and passed over for leadership roles (McKinsey & LeanIn.Org(opens in new window), 2024). This reflects a persistent double bind: women must demonstrate competence to be considered for advancement, yet doing so can trigger backlash for frying gender expectations.

Sexism also operates at a structural level, especially in hiring and promotion within male-dominated fields like engineering, aviation, and construction. Despite gains in education and experience, women remain underrepresented in these sectors and face slower career progression (McKinsey & LeanIn.Org(opens in new window), 2024). A 2024 study found that women are less likely to be shortlisted for interviews than equally qualified men, particularly when hiring decisions are made by managers rather than HR professionals (Travis, 2025). These patterns reveal how gender bias continues to shape workplace outcomes, often in subtle

but measurable ways.



Figure 8.2.3: Women now have many jobs previously closed to them, though they still face challenges in male-dominated occupations.
(credit: "Alex"/Flickr)

Religious Discrimination

Religious discrimination is prejudice and bias directed toward individuals based on their religious identity or practices. Similar to racism and sexism, religious discrimination operates both interpersonally and structurally, shaping how people are treated in everyday interactions and within institutions. For example, Muslim and Jewish Americans report disproportionately high levels of hostility, ranging from verbal harassment to organizational exclusion, compared to Christian counterparts (Scheitle & Ecklund, 2020). These experiences are not simply incidental but reflect broader cultural narratives such as Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, which frame certain religious groups as threatening or "outsiders."

Religious prejudice also manifests in subtle ways, such as assumptions about who is "truly American" or who belongs in professional spaces. Surveys show that a significant portion of U.S. adults link Christianity with national identity, which can marginalize non-Christian groups and reinforce exclusionary norms (Scheitle & Ecklund, 2020). In workplaces, employees who wear visible religious symbols—such as hijabs, yarmulkes, or turbans—may face bias in hiring or promotion, echoing the structural barriers seen in sexism and racism. These patterns reveal how religious identity, like race and gender, becomes a site of discrimination that limits opportunities and undermines communication competence across diverse communities.

Student Voice

Islamophobia in the USA

The form of prejudice I want to reflect on is Islamophobia and racism. As a Muslim Afghan woman, I often feel a mixture of gratitude and uneasiness. I am thankful that I live in the United States, where I can pursue my education, an opportunity many girls in Afghanistan are denied today. Every time I sit in a classroom or think about my future, I am reminded of those who are not allowed to do the same. That reminder motivates me, but it also makes me aware of how fragile basic rights can be.

In recent years, global conflicts and intense debates about immigration have made me more conscious of how quickly public attitudes can shift, and how those shifts affect the safety and visibility of Muslim communities like mine. I believe deeply that all people, regardless of background, deserve safety, dignity, and the freedom to live without fear. That belief shapes how I understand what is happening around me and how I connect with others.

I also admire the courage of people from many communities, including Jewish and Muslim, who speak out against violence and advocate for peace. Seeing those shared values gives me hope and reminds me that humanity is strongest when we stand together rather than apart. Even though I haven't personally experienced direct discrimination, I still feel nervous at times because I know how quickly misunderstanding can turn into prejudice.

For me, resilience means holding on to faith, hope, and education. Afghan families like mine continue moving forward despite uncertainty. Muslim women, whether or not they wear hijab, still learn, work, and raise their voices even when the world feels heavy. One strategy from the intercultural communication that resonates with me is storytelling. When people share their personal experiences, others begin to see them as individuals rather than stereotypes. If more stories were heard from Muslims, Afghans, Palestinians, Jewish people, and many others who seek peace, we would see more understanding and less fear.

Through storytelling, I hope to challenge assumptions and remind others that every person, no matter their faith or background, deserves dignity, understanding, and the freedom to thrive.

Sana Babakarkhil, Cerritos College Student

Heterosexism

While public support for LBGTQ+ rights has grown significantly in recent years, homophobia remains a persistent form of prejudice in U.S. society. In 2025, many LGBTQ+ individuals still face exclusion, microaggressions, and systemic discrimination in workplaces, schools, and communities (GLAAD, 2025). This bias often manifests in subtle ways - such as avoiding LGBTQ+ neighbors or co-workers - but also in more overt forms, including hiring discrimination and social rejection.

Despite legal protections in many states, LGBTQ+ job applicants continue to be passed over due to implicit bias. A recent audit study found that resumes with LGBTQ+ indicators received fewer callbacks than identical resumes without such markers, especially in conservative regions (Tilsik, Anteby, & Knight, 2024). These findings suggest that heteronormative expectations still shape perceptions of professionalism and belonging.

Homophobia can also be fueled by internal conflict. In a now-classic study, Adams, Wright, and Lohr (1996) explored the psychological roots of homophobic attitudes. They found that men who scored high on a homophobia scale showed physiological arousal to male-male sexual content, despite denying any attraction. THis paradox has led researchers to examine how repression, shame, and cultural norms may contribute to hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals.

Today, scholars emphasize that homophobia is not simply a personal prejudice - it is a social construct shaped by gender norms, religious ideologies, and power structures. Understanding its roots is essential for fostering inclusive communication and dismantling barriers to equality.

Ageism

People often form judgments and hold expectations about people based on their age, which can lead to ageism - prejudice or discrimination rooted in age-based stereotypes. While ageism most commonly targets older adults, younger people also experience bias, particularly in professional and leadership contexts (Stanford Center on Longevity, 2025). In U.S. culture, ageism remains one of the most socially accepted forms of prejudice, often portraying older adults as cognitively slow, physically frail, or less attractive (Weir, 2023). These stereotypes contribute to exclusion in healthcare, employment, and media representation, and have been linked to poorer health outcomes and reduced self-esteem among older adults (NCEA, 2025).

Importantly, attitudes toward aging vary across cultures. Many Asian, Latinx, and African American communities - both within and beyond the United States - continue to honor and respect older adults, valuing their wisdom and life experiences. Intergenerational programs and culturally grounded practices offer promising pathways to challenge ageist assumptions and promote more inclusive communication across age groups (Stanford Center on Longevity, 2025).

Types of Discrimination

Individual Discrimination

Individual discrimination is discrimination that individuals practice in their daily lives, usually because they are prejudiced. To many observers, the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 was a deadly example of individual discrimination. Martin, a 17-year-old African American, was walking in a gated community in Sanford, Florida, as he returned from a 7-Eleven with a bag of Skittles and some iced tea. An armed neighborhood watch volunteer, George Zimmerman, called 911 and said Martin looked suspicious. Although the 911 operator told Zimmerman not to approach Martin, Zimmerman did so anyway; within minutes Zimmerman shot and killed the unarmed Martin and later claimed self-defense. According to many critics of this incident, Martin's only "crime" was "walking while black." As an African American newspaper columnist observed, "For every black man in America, from the millionaire in the corner office to the mechanic in the local garage, the Trayvon Martin tragedy is personal. It could have been me or one of my sons. It could have been any of us" (Robinson, 2012).



Figure 8.2.4: Michael Flishman - Trayvon_Martin_Occupy March 21 - CC BY-SA 2.0

Much individual discrimination occurs in the workplace, as sociologist Denise Segura (Segura, 1992) documented when she interviewed 152 Mexican American women working in white-collar jobs at a public university in California. More than 40 percent of the women said they had encountered workplace discrimination based on their ethnicity and/or gender, and they attributed their treatment to stereotypes held by their employers and coworkers. Along with discrimination, they were the targets of condescending comments like "I didn't know that there were any educated people in Mexico that have a graduate degree."

Institutional Discrimination

Individual discrimination is important to address, but just as consequential in today's world is **institutional discrimination**, or discrimination that pervades the practices of whole institutions, such as housing, medical care, law enforcement, employment, and education. This type of discrimination does not just affect a few isolated individuals, instead, it affects large numbers of individuals simply because of their race, gender, ability, or other group affiliation.

Institutional discrimination often stems from prejudice, as was certainly true in the South during segregation. However, institutions can also discriminate without realizing it. They may make decisions that seem to be racially neutral, but upon close inspection, have a discriminatory effect against people of color. Unfortunately, too often institutional discrimination is a carefully orchestrated plan to target certain groups for discrimination, without appearing to. A particularly egregious example is the so-called War on Drugs, whereby discriminatory enforcement of drug laws resulted in higher arrest and incarceration rates for lower income, urban, communities of color. These communities are not reflective of increased prevalence of drug use, but rather of law enforcement's targeting of these populations. Institutional discrimination affects the life chances of people of color in many aspects of life today. To illustrate this, we turn to some examples of institutional discrimination that have been the subject of government investigation and scholarly research.

Criminal Justice

Since the launch of the "War on Drugs" in the 1980s, the U.S. incarceration rate has remained the highest among high-income nations. As of 2024, approximately 1.9 million people are incarcerated in the United States, with racial disparities continuing to define the system (Sawyer & Wagner, 2024). Black men remain nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than white men, and Black women are imprisoned at twice the rate of white women (The Sentencing Project, 2023). Although Black and Latinx individuals make up roughly 31% of the U.S. adult population, they account for over 52% of the incarcerated population (Bureau of Justice Statistics [BJS], 2024).

These disparities extend beyond prison walls. Nearly half of Black women report having a close family member who is or has been incarcerated, compared to just 12% of white women (Wang, 2023). The long-term effects on families and communities - especially children - are profound. Black children are significantly more likely to experience parental incarceration, particularly when fathers lack access to education or stable employment (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

California reflects this national pattern. In 2024, African Americans made up 28% of the male prison population in California, despite comprising only 6% of the state's male population (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation [CDCR], 2024). Latino men are also disproportionately represented, with incarceration rates nearly double those of white men. Despite similar rates of drug use across racial groups, Black Californians are still arrested and imprisoned at significantly higher rates for drug-related offenses - evidence of ongoing institutional bias in the criminal justice system (Racial and Identity Profiling Advisory Board, 2024).

Health Care

People of color have higher rates of disease and illness than whites, due in large part to institutional discrimination based on race and ethnicity. Several studies use hospital records to investigate whether people of color receive optimal medical care, including coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, and catheterization. A 2024 report from the Commonwealth Fund found that Black Americans and American Indians are significantly more likely to die from preventable and treatable conditions than white Americans - even in states with high-performing health systems (Commonwealth Fund, 2024). These disparities persist across income levels, with middle-class Black patients receiving fewer life-saving procedures such as coronary bypass surgery, angioplasty, and cardiac catheterization compared to their white counterparts (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality [AHRQ], 2025). One landmark study remains especially relevant. Shulman et. al. (1999) performed an experiment in which several hundred doctors viewed videos of African American and White patients, all of whom, unknown to the doctors, were actors. In the videos, each "patient" complained of identical chest pain and other symptoms. The doctors were then asked to indicate whether they thought the patient needed cardiac catheterization. The African American patients were less likely than the white patients to be recommended for this procedure (Schulman et al., 1999). Why does discrimination like this occur? While overt racism may play a role in some cases, research increasingly points to unconscious bias as a key driver of these disparities (AHRQ, 2025).

These health inequities are compounded by the intersection of race and incarceration. Incarcerated individuals - disproportionately people of color - face dramatically elevated rates of physical and mental health disorders. HIV is up to seven times more prevalent in prison populations, Hepatitis C up to 21 times more prevalent, and mental health disorders up to five times more common than in the general population (Wang, 2023). Roughly 68% of incarcerated individuals suffer from substance use disorders, yet only 15% receive adequate treatment (Wang, 2023). Because African Americans are overrepresented in the prison system, these disparities contribute to broader racial gaps in health outcomes. Mass incarceration, therefore, is not only a criminal justice issue - it is a public health crisis.

Housing

Although mortgage lenders are legally prohibited from considering race or ethnicity, racial disparities in mortgage approval persist. Recent studies show that Black and Latinx applicants are still more likely than white applicants to be denied mortgages - even when controlling for income, employment, and credit history (Richardson et. al., 2023). Audit studies using matched applicants of different races confirm that equally qualified Black and Latinx individuals face higher rejection rates and less favorable loan terms (National Fair Housing Alliance [NFHA], 2024).

These disparities are often justified by lenders as reflections of economic risk, yet they reveal patterns of institutional discrimination. Practices such as **redlining** - where banks and insurers deny services or charge higher rates in predominately nonwhite neighborhoods - continue to shape housing access. Although illegal, redlining persists through algorithmic bias, zoning laws, and selective marketing (NFHA, 2024; Rothstein, 2017).

Mortgage discrimination and redlining contribute to **residential segregation**, which remains widespread in many U.S. cities. African Americans, in particular, experience **hypersegregation**, a form of extreme spatial isolation that limits access to quality schools, jobs, and healthcare (NFHA, 2024). While online housing platforms have increased transparency, informal networks and selective listings still exclude people of color from certain neighborhoods.

Residential segregation reinforces cycles of poverty and marginalization. Concentrated disadvantage - marked by underemployment, crime, and limited mobility - continue to disproportionately affect Black communities. As Rothstein (2017) argues, segregation is not accidental but the result of decades of policy decisions that have shaped where people live and what opportunities they can access.

Employment

Title VII of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned racial discrimination in employment, including hiring, wages, and firing. Yet in 2025, racial disparities in earnings and employment outcomes persist. Black, Latinx, and Native American workers continue to earn significantly less than white workers, even when controlling for education and experience (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2024). These gaps reflect both conscious and unconscious bias in hiring practices, workplace culture, and access to advancement opportunities.

A foundational study by Devah Pager (2003) remains relevant today. In her field experiment, equally qualified Black and white men applied for entry-level jobs, some disclosing a criminal record. Strikingly, Black applicants without a criminal record were hired at the same low rate as white applicants with a criminal record - highlighting the compounded impact of racial bias and criminal history on employment.

Recent research confirms that incarceration continues to severely limit economic mobility. Formerly incarcerated individuals experience a 40-60% reduction in lifetime earnings, with Black men disproportionately affected due to higher incarceration rates and systemic barriers to reentry (Looney & Turner, 2018). These effects ripple across generations: approximately 2.7 million U.S. children have an incarcerated parent, and the absence of economic and emotional support significantly undermine child development and long-term opportunity (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024).

Conclusion

Throughout this section, we've examined how prejudice and discrimination manifest across multiple domains - race, gender, sexuality, age, health, housing, employment, and the criminal justice system. These patterns are not simply interpersonal; they are embedded in cultural narratives, institutional practices, and historical legacies that shape how we see others and how others see us.

From an intercultural perspective, understanding prejudice requires more than identifying bias - it demands that we explore how cultural assumptions, power imbalances, and systemic inequities influence perception and interaction.
Whether through implicit bias or overt exclusion, discrimination limits access to opportunity and belonging, especially for those whose identities fall outside dominant cultural norms.

It's important to keep in mind that these dynamics are not fixed. They are learned, reinforced, and therefore, can be unlearned. By recognizing how cultural frameworks shape our judgement, we can begin to challenge essentialist thinking, foster empathy, and create more inclusive spaces for dialogue and growth.

As we move into the final section on **Racism and Privilege**, we shift our focus from individual acts of bias to border systems of advantage. Privilege often operates invisibly, benefiting some while marginalizing others. Understanding how privilege intersects with race, culture, and identity is essential for building intercultural competence and working toward equity in communication and society.

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8.4: Racism and Privilege

In May of 2020, protests provoked by the brutal murder of George Floyd, an African-American man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, reached historic levels in the United States. These protests are occurring in communities large and small, and even in several other countries. Major cities from Sacramento to Philadelphia are under nightly curfews. Of course, these protests aren't just about the murder of George Floyd. Rather, his murder is preceded by a long history of highly publicized instances in which African Americans were killed by law enforcement. Consider this partial list:

- March 3, 1991: A video camera captures four Los Angeles Police Department officers beating Rodney King in one of the first viral police brutality videos.
- April 21, 1992: A jury acquits the four officers who beat Rodney King. Riots ensue.
- February 26, 2012: Trayvon Martin, 17, is shot by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman is acquitted of murder.
- July 17, 2014: NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo kills Eric Garner. Pantaleo is never convicted.
- August 9, 2014: Ferguson officer Darren Wilson kills 18-year-old Mike Brown Jr. No charges are filed.
- November 22, 2014: Cleveland officer Timothy Loehman kills 12-year-old Tamir Rice. Loehman is not charged.
- April 4, 2015: A bystander films officer Michael Slager shooting Walter Scott in the back. Slager is sentenced to 20 years in prison.
- July 13, 2015: Sandra Bland dies in police custody after a violent arrest. No one is convicted.
- July 2, 2016: Officer Heronimo Yanez shoots Philando Castile during a traffic stop. Yanez is acquitted.
- September 6, 2018: Officer Amber Guyger enters Botham Jean's home and kills him. She is convicted of murder.
- May 25, 2020: Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin kills George Floyd by kneeling on his neck. Chauvin is convicted of murder; three other officers are later convicted of aiding and abetting.
- April 11, 2021: Brooklyn Center, MN, officer Kim Potter fatally shoots Daunte Wright during a traffic stop. Potter is convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to two years.
- April 21, 2021: Andrew Brown Jr. was shot and killed by deputies in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, while trying to drive away during the execution of a search warrant. The district attorney refused to file charges, citing that the shooting was "justified."
- June 27, 2022: Jayland Walker was shot more than 40 times by Akron, Ohio, police after a car and foot chase. Walker was unarmed at the time of the shooting. No officers were charged.
- January 7, 2023: Tyre Nichols is brutally beaten by five Memphis police officers during a traffic stop. He died three days later. All five officers are fired and charged with second-degree murder.
- March 2024: Dexter Reed was shot and killed by Chicago police during a traffic stop. Bodycam footage showed officers firing nearly 100 rounds. The incident is still under federal investigation.

These examples span a 35-year period, but racism can be traced back to the 15th century when European imperialists set out to colonize the rest of the world. Alongside these imperialist ventures, racialization also ensued, where colonized peoples were positioned as inferior. This process was extended across the planet and became embedded in countries colonized by Europeans, resulting in a redistribution of world resources through the politicization of biological attributes. In other words, the dynamic of racism, whereby individuals and groups of people are discriminated against and subjugated on the basis of perceived physical characteristics such as skin color, has been and continues to be a pervasive and destructive force in many human societies. In this section, we will examine the ideology and consequences of racism, and the interconnected concepts of power and privilege.

> The United Nations International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination defines racial discrimination as: Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

Racism

Racism is a set of economic, political, and ideological practices whereby a dominant group exercises control over subordinate groups. Racism is a concept founded upon the scientifically false premises that there are physical and psychological inequalities between human races (See Chapter 4). Racism can be expressed through more overt expressions of individual discrimination or exclusion based on race, and may also be expressed through institutional discrimination, where the disenfranchisement of groups based on race is embedded into the culture. Institutional discrimination based on race, or **institutional racism,** refers

to the way in which racial distinctions are used, whether intentional or not, to organize the policy and practice of state, judicial, economic, and educational institutions. As a result, these distinctions systematically reproduce inequalities along racial lines. Just as institutional discrimination in general is often harder to prove and identify, institutional racism specifically is pervasive in our society and significantly impacts the lives of those in the nondominant group.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed how racism affects health outcomes in the United States. Black Americans died from COVID-19 at much higher rates than white Americans. In fact, by 2023, Black Americans had one of the highest death rates from the virus (APM Research Lab, 2023). These differences weren't just about poverty or where people live - they were also about racism in health care and society. Many Black communities face limited access to healthy food, clean air, and medical care. These conditions contribute to chronic illnesses like diabetes and asthma, which increase vulnerability to COVID-19. But researchers emphasize that racism itself- through stress, unequal treatment, and fewer resources - also harms black health (Geronimus et al, 2023).

Even before COVID-19, Black Americans had worse health than white Americans. They die younger and face more serious illnesses. They die younger and face more serious illnesses. Every year, about 100,000 more Black people die than expected if they had the same health outcomes as white people. Experts believe that the stress of living in a racist society plays a big role in these health gaps (Geronimus et al., 2023). This ongoing stress creates what some researchers call a "hidden toll" - the physical and emotional cost of facing racism throughout life (Blitstein, 2009).

It's important to note that racism affects other communities of color as well. Indigenous populations experience some of the highest rates of poverty, chronic illness, and suicide in the U.S., often due to historical trauma and systemic neglect (Indian Health Service, 2024). Latinx communities face barriers to healthcare access, language discrimination, and disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards (Baumgartner, Aboulafia, Getachew, Radley, Collins, & Zephyrin, 2021). Asian Americans, while often stereotyped as a "model minority," have faced increased hate crimes and scapegoating during the COVID-19 pandemic, revealing how racialized narratives shift across contexts (Jeung et al., 2023).

From an intercultural communication perspective, these patterns show how race intersects with culture, language, and power. Racism not only affects access to resources - it also shapes how people are perceived, how they communicate, and how they are treated in everyday interactions. Understanding institutional racism requires us to listen across cultures, challenge dominant narratives, and recognize how systemic inequality is reproduced through communication itself.

Privilege and Power

It is difficult to travel very far along the path of cultural understanding, and in particular an understanding of cultural difference, without running up against the issues of racism and privilege. A significant challenge in understanding the nature and impact of racism and privilege is being open to examining our own experience of these issues. Hopefully, you have been thinking about your own cultural identity as you have been reading this chapter. If so, then you have been thinking about labels that define you culturally. Maybe you have defined yourself as female, Latina, and heterosexual. Or maybe you have labeled yourself as gay, white, working-class, and male. When we give ourselves labels such as these, often we ask ourselves, "Where do I fit in?" This is a good question to ask and demonstrates a recognition of the fact that you belong to more than one culture and that your cultures intersect in various ways. The most significant manifestation of these intersections is **power**—the ability to influence others and control our lives. From the information given earlier in the chapter and from your own experiences, you should realize that some groups have more power than others. These people are what we refer to as the **dominant group:** white, male, Christian, middle-class, able-bodied, educated, and heterosexual (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Johnson, 2022). People whose cultural identities do not conform to this model are the **nondominant groups** and have less sociopolitical and economic power (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins 2019). As you think about privilege and the resulting advantages that some groups have over others, you should also keep in mind two facts. One, privilege is a relative concept that varies according to context. In some situations, we may be more privileged than others, and in order to access some of that privilege we may decide to highlight or conceal parts of our identity. For example, unless a person tells you, you have no way of knowing their sexual orientation. Thus, a gay man might decide to "pass" as straight at a family reunion to avoid conflict from a heterosexist family. Two, we may have aspects of our identities that are simultaneously advantaged and disadvantaged. The gay, white, working-class, male above is advantaged by the fact that he has light skin and is male, and is disadvantaged by the fact that he is gay and working class.

White Privilege

Skin color is one of the more disturbing, largely unexamined, and persistent social constructs that perpetuates discrimination and divides power Roberts, 2023; Smedley & Smedley, 2012). For Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, the category of

race subsumes all other sources of social division, including gender (Moreton-Robinson, 2020). Whether they realize it or not, White people enjoy societal advantages in their daily lives, simply because they are white. Social scientists term these advantages **white privilege**, a concept that highlights how white privilege operates as a position of power and normalized dominance in many societies (McIntosh, 2022; DiAngelo, 2021).

This chapter's discussion of the problems facing people of color points to some of these advantages. For example, whites can usually drive a car at night or walk down a street without having to fear that a police officer will stop them simply because they are white. Recalling the Trayvon Martin tragedy, they can also walk down a street without having to fear they will be confronted and possibly killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer. In addition, whites can count on being able to move into any neighborhood they desire as long as they can afford the rent or mortgage. They generally do not have to fear being passed up for promotion simply because of their race. White students can live in college dorms without having to worry that racial slurs will be directed their way. White people in general do not have to worry about being the victims of hate crimes based on their race. They can be seated in a restaurant without having to worry that they will be served more slowly or not at all because of their skin color. If they are in a hotel, they do not have to think that someone will mistake them for a bellhop, parking valet, or maid. If they are trying to hail a taxi, they do not have to worry about the taxi driver ignoring them because the driver fears he or she will be robbed.

Peggy McIntosh defines white privilege as an invisible knapsack of advantages that some people carry around. They are invisible because they are often not recognized, seen as normative (i.e., "that's just the way things are"), seen as universal (i.e., "everyone has them"), or used unconsciously. Below is a list of some of the privileges McIntosh identifies. Can you think of others?

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, and into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
21. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose a blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

Social scientist Robert W. Terry (1981, p. 120) once summarized white privilege as follows: "*To be white in America is not to have to think about it.* Except for hard-core racial supremacists, the meaning of being white is having the choice of attending to or

ignoring one's own whiteness" (emphasis in original). For people of color in the United States, it is not an exaggeration to say that race and ethnicity is a daily fact of their existence. Yet whites do not generally have to think about being white. As all of us go about our daily lives, this basic difference is one of the most important manifestations of racial and ethnic inequality in the United States.

For those of us who come from a privileged racial background, unpacking what it means to be white can prove a challenging and confronting task. Research found that the question, 'What does it mean to be white?' was very challenging for white Euro-Americans – the question simply did not make sense. Interviewing in downtown San Francisco, researchers found that the most common response to this question was to ask if it was a trick. Incredulity was usually followed by a declaration that this was not something they ever thought about.

Perhaps because whites do not have to think about being white, many studies find they tend to underestimate the degree of racial inequality in the United States by assuming that African Americans and Latinos are much better off than they really are. As one report summarized these studies' overall conclusion, "Whites tend to have a relatively rosy impression of what it means to be a black person in America. Whites are more than twice as likely as blacks to believe that the position of African Americans has improved a great deal" (Vedantam, 2008, p. A3). Because whites think African Americans and Latinos fare much better than they really do, that perception probably reduces whites' support for programs designed to reduce racial and ethnic inequality, such as Affirmative Action.

Engaging with issues of racism and privilege can be very challenging – both intellectually and personally. The above discussion about privilege and Whiteness is not meant to suggest that those people with white privilege should feel ashamed or guilty. This is often a trap that people fall into and it can shut down important thinking and conversations about intercultural communication. It's important to realize that everyone has a racial identity. Effective change lies in making whiteness visible, by exploring it as a racial or cultural construct, and defining whiteness in a non-defensive and non-racist manner. When we remove the White race from the often-unidentified "normative" group, it provides a context for studying, talking about, and hopefully improving race relations. Such an understanding will involve thinking about these issues not just as abstract concepts but also as they manifest in our own lives. For some this may mean reflecting on the experience of racism themselves, while for others it will involve recognizing and understanding the often-invisible experience of privilege. In order to do this: White society must be willing to look at themselves honestly, to confront the truth about themselves and the world, and to liberate themselves from the invisible cultural conditioning of a racialized society.

From an intercultural communication perspective, the goal is to create a society that is **antiracist**, which involves the active practice of identifying, challenging, and changing organizational structures, policies, practices, and attitudes that perpetuate systemic racism. While this may seem like a daunting task, every person can do their part. Consider these three action steps:

1. Notice differences in treatment
2. Talk about white privilege and other forms of social privilege.
3. Be willing to teach other people about privilege and power.

Conclusion

Racism and privilege profoundly shape the landscape of intercultural communication, often creating invisible barriers that distort understanding, limit empathy, and reinforce systemic inequities. When individuals carry unexamined privilege or internalized biases into intercultural encounters, they risk silencing marginalized voices, misinterpreting cultural cues, and perpetuating stereotypes that hinder genuine connection. These dynamics not only affect interpersonal relationships but also influence institutional practices, educational settings, and global collaborations.

To foster meaningful intercultural communication, it is essential to recognize how racism and privilege operate - both overtly and subtly - and to actively cultivate reflexivity, humility, and a commitment to equity. This means listening deeply, challenging assumptions, and creating spaces where diverse identities are not just acknowledged but valued. Only by confronting these structural and interpersonal dynamics can we move toward communication that is truly inclusive, transformative, and capable of bridging cultural divides.

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8.5: Toolkit for Responding to Barriers in Communication

Using Communication to Challenge Barriers

Chances are that at some point in your life, you will encounter barriers to intercultural communication—whether in the form of racism, sexism, discrimination, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, or another kind of prejudice, and whether it is directed at you or at someone else. When Angela was ten years old and playing in a school softball game, another child began taunting one of her friends, who was of Filipino descent. She didn't fully understand why the boy's comments made her so uncomfortable; she only knew in her heart that what he was saying was cruel and a form of bullying. She spoke up and told him to stop. In response, he punched her in the eye. That black eye eventually became a small badge of honor when her family, her friend, and her school praised her for standing up for someone being targeted.

Now, we certainly don't want anyone to end up with a black eye. Instead, we invite you to reflect on your own beliefs and consider how you might choose to respond if you ever find yourself in a situation where someone is using prejudice to harm or demean another person.

1. Start with the Person in the Mirror.

Effective intercultural communication begins with self-reflection. Before engaging others, actively work to dismantle your own biases. Expand your "cultural empathy" by reading literature from different perspectives, attending diverse cultural events, and moving beyond stereotypes to interact with people as individuals.

2. Be open to feedback.

If someone lets you know that your words, actions, or symbols come across as hurtful or discriminatory, pause and take it seriously. You don't have to be perfect—you just have to be willing to listen. A simple response like **"Thanks for telling me—I didn't realize that"** shows respect and keeps the conversation open.

Take a moment to reflect, adjust your language or behavior, and remember the Golden Rule: treat others the way you would want to be treated. Being open to feedback is one of the strongest signs of growth and allyship.

3. Gauge Intent with Clarifying Questions

If someone says something offensive, ask: "*Why do you say that?*" or "*What do you mean by that?*" This forces the speaker to reflect on their words and helps you determine if the comment was born of malice or simple ignorance.

4. Address the Action, Not the Identity

Avoid labeling someone as "a racist," which usually causes them to shut down. Instead, focus on the behavior or words: "*That comment sounded hurtful*" or "*That joke makes me feel uncomfortable.*" Separating the person from the act makes the issue the focus, rather than the person's character.

5. Use the "Teachable Moment" Approach

Treat encounters with prejudice as opportunities to reduce fear and ignorance. If you feel safe and the person seems willing to listen, gently explain why a statement might be offensive. However, avoid "preaching"—education is most effective when the other person is open to dialogue. Say something like "I am not sure if you are aware, but did you know that word means.....?"

6. Set Clear Social Boundaries

If you receive offensive content (like a racist email or text), respond with a brief, emotionless boundary: "*I found that hurtful and offensive. Please do not forward things like this to me in the future.*" This clearly establishes what is considered acceptable in

your social or professional circle.

7. Leverage the Power of the Bystander

Research shows that when a bystander speaks up, it validates the victim's sense of belonging and signals to the offender that their views are not the social norm. A calm, measured intervention from a witness can have a profound influence on everyone present.

8. Use Disarming Kindness

Sometimes, the most effective way to "wake someone up" is through unexpected compassion. Responding to hostility with a kind gesture or a simple compliment can highlight the absurdity of the prejudice and encourage the offender to reassess their views.

9. Master the "Social Media Pivot."

When encountering common tropes online (like stereotypes about different ethnic groups), consider blocking the sender, unsubscribing from the source, or responding in a manner to will not escalate the comment, such as "I'm calling this out because it matters and that stereotype is not okay. We can do better."

10. Prioritize Safety and Context

The "right" response depends on your environment. In a workplace, persistent issues should be documented and reported to HR. In a public space with strangers, your physical safety is the priority; if a situation feels volatile, the best communication strategy is often to disengage and leave immediately. At family gatherings, it may be best to speak with someone privately rather than calling them out in front of the entire family.

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8.6: Conclusion

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined the barriers that hinder effective intercultural communication, focusing on how ethnocentrism, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism shape the ways individuals and groups interact. It began by exploring **ethnocentrism**—the tendency to view one's own cultural norms as the standard—and showed how this mindset distorts perception and fuels harmful stereotypes. The chapter also highlighted how seemingly neutral tools, such as world maps, can reinforce cultural bias, contrasting the Eurocentric Mercator projection with the more equitable Gall-Peters map.

Building on this foundation, the chapter distinguished **prejudice** from **discrimination**, emphasizing that prejudice is an attitude while discrimination is an action. Students learned how microaggressions, media portrayals, and institutional practices contribute to unequal treatment across social groups. The chapter also revealed how privilege and cultural assumptions shape everyday interactions, often in ways that disadvantage marginalized communities.

The discussion then turned to **racism and privilege**, addressing the realities of systemic racism in the United States, including police violence against African-Americans and the heightened inequities exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter defined both individual and institutional racism and introduced the concept of white privilege, encouraging students to reflect on how unearned advantages and structural barriers shape lived experiences.

The chapter concluded with a **Toolkit for Responding to Barriers in Communication**, offering practical strategies for recognizing bias, interrupting harmful patterns, and engaging in conversations about identity and inequality with greater awareness and responsibility. Together, these sections underscore that intercultural communication requires not only skill but also a commitment to equity, empathy, and social understanding.

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9: INTERCULTURAL CONFLICT

Learning Objectives

- Define intercultural conflict and identify the benefits of healthy conflict negotiation
- Describe the cultural dynamics shaping intercultural conflict
- Illustrate common conflict goals and outcomes
- Summarize the principles of Face Negotiation Theory
- Identify different types of conflict management styles
- Understand communication strategies that promote healthy intercultural conflict resolution

9.1: Introduction to Intercultural Conflict

9.2: Benefits of Studying Intercultural Conflict

9.3: Intercultural Conflict Defined

9.4: Dynamics of Intercultural Conflict

9.5: Intercultural Conflict Goals

9.6: Intercultural Conflict Outcomes

9.7: Face Negotiation Theory

9.8: Conflict Styles

9.9: Growing Your Intercultural Conflict Management Skills

9.10: Conclusion

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9.1: Introduction to Intercultural Conflict



Figure 9.1.1: Manikans at a Disney storefront

In the summer of 2010, the Walt Disney Company was in the news for a different kind of drama than its typical princess stories. A Muslim woman, Imane Boudlal, a hostess at the Storytellers Café in Disneyland's California Adventure, was in a public battle with her employer (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012). She had decided to begin wearing a hijab, a headscarf worn by observant Muslim women, at work. Her supervisors told her this was a violation of the company's "look" policy, a detailed set of rules for employees' appearance designed to protect the "Disney magic." They offered her two options: work in a non-public area of the restaurant, or wear a large fedora hat on top of her hijab. Ms. Boudlal refused, stating that these options were humiliating and an infringement of her religious beliefs. She was subsequently removed from the work schedule and, with the help of the ACLU, filed a lawsuit against Disney for religious discrimination and harassment. The case was later settled outside of court.

This case, which captured the attention of many, is a powerful example of the complexities of intercultural communication and conflict. It highlights the clash of deeply held cultural and religious beliefs with institutional policies and practices. Most of us, hopefully, will never experience a conflict that is so severe and so public. But the underlying themes of this dilemma are more common than one might expect.

When was the last time you had a misunderstanding or a conflict with someone from a different background? Whether it's a minor miscommunication, such as a gesture that means one thing to you but something else entirely to them, or a major issue like navigating different workplace norms or social expectations, chances are you have experienced conflict in an intercultural setting. Communication is key to understanding and navigating these situations, as our communication behaviors are often a reflection of our cultural identity. This chapter will ask you to reflect on your own cultural background and to develop communication skills to help you navigate conflict in a diverse world more effectively. First, we examine the benefits of studying intercultural conflict. Second, we will explore definitions of conflict and identify what makes intercultural conflict unique. Third, we explore unique characteristics that enhance our understanding of the conflict process.

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9.2: Benefits of Studying Intercultural Conflict



Figure 9.2.1: Friends laying on the grass and laughing.

The pervasiveness of conflict across cultural boundaries provides a strong justification for studying **intercultural conflict**. As globalization, migration, and international collaboration increase, so does the likelihood of encountering cultural misunderstandings. There are several personal and professional benefits to developing intercultural conflict competence (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

- **Conflict management skills are not inborn—they are learned.** By studying intercultural conflict, individuals can develop communication strategies that foster mutual respect and reduce cultural misinterpretations.
- **Mental health may be improved** as individuals learn to navigate cultural tensions with empathy and mindfulness, rather than avoidance or aggression.
- **Family relationships and overall well-being** are often shaped by cultural values and expectations. Constructive intercultural conflict management can help bridge generational and cultural divides within families.
- **Long-term satisfaction in intercultural relationships**—whether romantic, familial, or professional—often depends on the ability to negotiate cultural differences with sensitivity and skill (Chen & Starosta, 2000).
- **Romantic partners from different cultural backgrounds** who practice positive conflict management are more likely to experience trust, intimacy, and resilience in their relationships.
- **Workplace relationships in multicultural environments** are frequently marked by differing communication styles, values, and conflict norms. Learning effective intercultural negotiation skills can improve collaboration and reduce misunderstandings (Gudykunst, 2004).
- **Individuals from marginalized or minority cultural groups** benefit from exploring constructive models of conflict that validate their experiences and promote equity in dialogue.

The next section of this chapter explores definitions of interpersonal and intercultural conflict, the impact of perception conflict, common sources of intercultural conflict, conflict styles, facework negotiation, and skill building for peaceful conflict resolution.

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9.3: Intercultural Conflict Defined



Figure 9.3.1: A peace symbol made up of words related to conflict and relationships.

Interpersonal conflict occurs when two or more interdependent parties perceive and experience a struggle over incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2018). However, when you add culture to the mix, conflict can take on an added level of complexity. For example, Joe and Roula are a happily married couple living in Southern California with their two young sons. Joe, who is French, and Roula, who is Lebanese, met while studying at the Sorbonne in France. After marrying, they relocated to the U.S. when Joe secured a prestigious position as an environmental engineer. Their sons, born in the U.S., speak fluent English and French. Roula, however, is frustrated that they do not speak Lebanese fluently. She is feeling homesick and would like to relocate the family to Lebanon until the boys are ready for high school. Roula believes Joe does not fully understand her emotional needs, as he is focused on the demands of his job.

Joe and Roula are experiencing what is known as **intercultural conflict**. According to Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012), **intercultural conflict** is "the implicit or explicit emotional struggle or frustration between persons of different cultures over perceived incompatible values, norms, face orientations, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes in a communication situation"(p. 181). What distinguishes intercultural conflict from interpersonal conflict is the presence of **significant cultural differences**—such as values, beliefs, and communication styles—that shape how conflict is experienced and expressed.

Here is a breakdown of some of the key concepts in the definition:

- **Incompatible Cultural Values and Norms**: Joe and Roula's differing cultural backgrounds influence their expectations around language, family proximity, and child-rearing. Roula's desire to immerse her children in Lebanese culture reflects collectivist values and a strong connection to heritage. Joe's focus on career stability and staying in the U.S. reflects more individualistic norms.

- **Face Orientations**: In intercultural conflict, "face" refers to a person's sense of identity and dignity within their cultural context. Roula may feel that her cultural identity is being overlooked or minimized, while Joe may feel pressure to maintain professional success and provide for the family—both are trying to preserve face in different ways.

- **Scarce Resources**: Time, emotional support, and cultural exposure are all perceived as limited. Roula feels she is losing access to her cultural roots and familial support, while Joe may feel stretched thin by work obligations and the prospect of relocating.

- **Processes and Outcomes**: The way each partner approaches decision-making and expresses emotion may be shaped by

their cultural upbringing. Roula may prefer indirect or emotionally expressive communication, while Joe may lean toward direct, pragmatic dialogue. These differing processes can lead to misunderstandings and frustration.

- **Underestimated Cultural Differences**: Often, intercultural conflict is intensified by subtle communication differences that go unnoticed. Joe and Roula may assume they are simply having a "relationship disagreement," when, in fact, deeper cultural values are at play.

Now that you have a basic understanding of conflict, let's dig a little deeper into the characteristics that separate interpersonal from intercultural conflict, including perception, conflict goals, outcomes, and cultural values.

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9.4: Dynamics of Intercultural Conflict

Intercultural conflict is more than a disagreement; it is a dynamic process shaped by how people perceive one another, what they hope to achieve, and how they manage their identities and relationships in the process. To understand intercultural conflict, we need to look at the underlying elements that drive it: the perceptions that frame our interpretations, the goals that motivate our actions, the outcomes that shape relationships, and the cultural patterns that influence how we negotiate face and identity. Together, these dimensions provide a framework for analyzing conflict across cultural contexts and for developing more mindful, effective responses."

The way conflict unfolds begins with perception—how individuals interpret the situation, the people involved, and the meaning of the interaction.

Perception

As you may recall, we learned about perception in Chapter 8. Our perception process plays a central role in shaping how we experience intercultural conflict. The way we interpret a situation—what we notice, how we assign meaning, and what we believe is the "right" way to resolve it—is often influenced by our cultural background. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) identify three key features that help explain how perception effects intercultural conflict.

- **Cultural filters and stereotypes**: Our perceptions are shaped by cultural assumptions, which can lead to misunderstandings. For example, a U.S. manager might perceive a Japanese employee's silence during meetings as disengagement, when in fact it reflects a cultural norm of listening respectfully before speaking.

- **Ethnocentric bias in attribution**: Thinking back to what you learned in chapter 7, you will recall that ethnocentrism is the learned tendency to view our culture's beliefs, values, and practices as the norm. When we assume our own cultural norms are the standard, we may misinterpret others' behavior. For instance, a French team leader might view an Indian colleague's reluctance to challenge authority as a lack of initiative, rather than a culturally respectful approach to hierarchy.
- **Differences in verbal and nonverbal conflict styles**: Communication styles vary widely across cultures, which can complicate conflict resolution. A Brazilian employee may use expressive gestures and emotional language to convey urgency, while a Dutch coworker may prefer calm, direct speech—leading each to misread the other's intent.

Cultural Close-Up

In Persian culture, the deep-rooted value of *Adab va Ehteram*—translated loosely as "courtesy and respect in social relations"—shapes how individuals think, speak, and relate to others. This value encourages Iranians to center the presence of others in their communication and to align their language with the esteem they hold for those around them. One way this is expressed is through the cultural concept of *sharmandegi*, or "being ashamed," which conveys humility and deference.

While intended to show respect, *sharmandegi* can lead to misunderstanding in intercultural interactions. For example:

- When expressing gratitude: "You really make me ashamed."
- When offering something: "Please help yourself, I'm ashamed—it's not worthy of you."
- When making a request: "I'm ashamed, may I beg a few minutes of your time?"
- When apologizing: "I'm really ashamed the children's noise disturbed your sleep."

To non-Persian speakers, these phrases may sound overly self-deprecating or confusing. But within Persian cultural norms, they reflect a sincere effort to honor the relationship and maintain social harmony (Sharifian, 2005).

While perception frames how we see conflict, our goals set the stage for why conflict occurs and what we hope to accomplish. Understanding conflict goals helps explain why disagreements often feel more complex than they appear on the surface.

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9.5: Intercultural Conflict Goals



Figure: 9.5.1: A group of people engaging in tug-of-war against silhouetted by the sunset.

Have you ever visited an Escape Room? An escape room is a great metaphor for conflict, as you have a group of interdependent people locked in the same situation, who may interpret clues differently but rely on one another for success. To succeed in an escape room, you must collaborate, but competing goals, frustration, and miscommunication can derail progress. In intercultural communication, conflict can feel like each person is pulling in a different direction based on culturally shaped needs, values, and goals. When we experience intercultural conflict, the tension is often rooted in one of four goals: content, relational, identity, and process. Identifying the underlying source of conflict can help you better understand your own cultural perspective, empathize with others whose values may differ, and help you escape the conflict.

Content Goals

Content or topic goals refer to what we want and need in our day-to-day and long-term lives. These goals often feel tangible and concrete, and they can center on issues such as how we spend money, time, and how we live. In intercultural contexts, content goals may be shaped by differing cultural norms. For example, Fatima, who grew up in a collectivist culture in Jordan, was frustrated when her American roommate, Rachel, insisted on splitting every grocery bill down to the cent. Fatima believed in sharing resources as a gesture of friendship, while Rachel valued financial independence and fairness. What began as a disagreement over money revealed deeper cultural differences in expectations around generosity and autonomy.

Relational Goals

Relational goals refer to our preferences for how relationships should function—who we are to each other, how power is distributed, and what our future looks like. These goals can become a source of conflict when cultural expectations about relationships differ. For example, in some East Asian cultures, hierarchy and respect for elders are central to relational dynamics. When Jun, a Korean intern, hesitated to speak up during team meetings, his American supervisor interpreted it as disengagement. In reality, Jun was showing deference to authority, a relational norm in his culture. Misaligned expectations about participation and respect created tension in their working relationship.

Identity Goals

Identity goals refer to how we want to be seen and valued by others. In intercultural conflict, identity issues often arise when

someone's cultural identity feels threatened or misunderstood. Consider the story of Leila, a second-generation Iranian American student. During a group project, her classmates repeatedly mispronounced her name and dismissed her suggestions. Leila felt invisible and stereotyped, and the conflict escalated when she was labeled "too sensitive." Her frustration wasn't just about the project—it was about feeling unseen and disrespected in a space where her cultural identity was already marginalized.

Identity conflicts can occur in families, classrooms, workplaces, and social settings—especially when cultural pride, belonging, or representation are at stake.

Process Goals

Process goals refer to how we believe conflict should be communicated and resolved. These goals are deeply influenced by cultural norms. For example, in German culture, directness and structured debate are often valued in conflict resolution. In contrast, many Japanese professionals prefer indirect communication and consensus-building. When Hiroshi, a Japanese executive, met with his German counterpart to discuss a contract dispute, Hiroshi's subtle suggestions were interpreted as evasive, while the German executive's blunt feedback felt aggressive to Hiroshi. Their disagreement wasn't just about the contract—it was about how conflict should be handled.

Process goals reflect deeper cultural meanings around authority, timing, emotional expression, and decision-making. Some cultures may rely on hierarchical decision-making, while others prioritize equal participation and group harmony (Alvarez, 2011).

If you find yourself repeatedly struggling with conflict over the same topic goals, a deeper relational or identity issue may be at play. Take the example of Fatima and Rachel's grocery bill dispute. On the surface, it seems like a simple content issue. But the repeated tension may reflect a deeper relational disconnect or a need for cultural validation and respect.

The goals we pursue inevitably shape the outcomes of conflict. Whether conflicts end in resolution, compromise, or escalation depends on how goals are negotiated and balanced. Not only do conflicts originate from misunderstanding, disagreements, and competing needs, but we can also see that conflict is often framed as having different outcomes.

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9.6: Intercultural Conflict Outcomes



Figure 9.6.1: LeBron James playing basketball for the Lakers.

The photo above—LeBron James and the Lakers in action—captures the intensity and drive often associated with competition in Western cultures. In the United States, conflict is frequently framed in terms of winning and losing, a mindset that can spill into relationships, where people may try to "win" arguments or assert dominance. In contrast, cultures like Japan's professional baseball league allow games to end in a tie—a result that reflects balance, mutual respect, and player well-being. These different approaches to winning help illustrate the range of possible conflict outcomes.

Conflict outcomes refer to how a conflict is resolved and how the people involved perceive the results. Game Theory uses the metaphor of winning and losing games to describe three potential outcomes: win-win, win-lose, and lose-lose (Spangler, 2003). Though this approach has a decidedly Western cultural leaning, it lends understanding to the underlying rules of many conflicts.

- Win-Win: A win-win outcome occurs when both parties are satisfied. For example, when a Chinese and Canadian team collaborated on a tech project, they initially clashed over meeting styles. The Chinese team preferred formal agendas and hierarchy, while the Canadians favored open discussion. After negotiating a hybrid format, both teams felt heard and respected—resulting in a successful partnership.

- Win-Lose: A win-lose outcome occurs when one party gets what they want and the other feels defeated. For instance, a Nigerian employee requested flexible hours for religious observance, but the company denied the request, citing productivity concerns. The company maintained its schedule, but the employee felt undervalued and disengaged.

- Lose-Lose: A lose-lose outcome occurs when neither party achieves their goals. Consider the case of Amir, an Egyptian software developer who left his job in Germany after repeated cultural misunderstandings with his manager. Amir felt his ideas were dismissed due to his accent and communication style, while the manager felt Amir was resistant to feedback. The company lost a talented employee, and Amir lost a job he once loved.

There is no one-size-fits-all outcome for conflict. The resolution depends on the topic, the cultural context, and the people involved. It's important to consider how much you value the relationship and what's at stake. Is it a lifelong bond, a professional partnership, or a casual connection? Your conflict management style—and your cultural lens—will shape the outcome. Beyond individual goals and outcomes, cultural values influence how people manage identity and respect in conflict. Face Negotiation Theory provides a lens for understanding how different cultures approach conflict management and the protection of self and other.

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9.7: Face Negotiation Theory



Figure 9.7.1: Drama and Comedy masks.

Have you ever heard someone say, “I need to save face?” In the United States, face-saving generally refers to an individual recovering from embarrassment, a put-down, or a public disappointment. However, the concept of face takes on a different meaning when we examine it through the lens of conflict and culture. **Face** refers to the favorable social impression we would like to present during social interactions (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). For example, you might want the people in your life to see you as a caring family member, a trusting friend, a good student, and as funny and adventurous. The concept of face is at the heart of **face-negotiation theory**, which provides a useful way to understand the relationships between culture and conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988). The theory suggests that we use communication to maintain and negotiate our face and that culture influences the way we handle conflict because of our face concerns, cultural background, and situational factors. These three factors interact to shape how we communicate about conflict.

Take a moment to pause and reflect: How do you want other people to see you? The impression you would like to make on others is known as our face concerns. **Face concerns** are the social impressions you would like to make on others and are tied to your identity. Take, for example, when you meet a romantic partner's family for the first time. It is likely that you would like to make a positive impression on the family and hope that they will like you for who you are. We have two face concerns: self-face and other-face. Self-face is when we focus on maintaining the image we project to others, and other-face is when we focus on protecting the image and feelings of others. Your face concerns are, in turn, shaped by your cultural background.

Your **cultural background** is shaped by your family's cultural heritage, ethnic identity, and cultural values, such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, and high- and low-context communication styles (Hofstede, 2001). In individualistic, low-context cultures like that of the United States, where people tend to prefer individuality, autonomy, and care for themselves and their immediate family, people are more likely to feel comfortable disagreeing openly and communicating directly about conflict. In collectivistic, high-context cultures like those in China and Mexico, where people tend to put group needs before individual needs in exchange for loyalty, and expect their in-groups will take care of them, people may be more likely to use indirect messages, avoidance, and accommodation. Low- and high-context communication, which is covered in detail in Chapter 5, refers to the degree to which cultures prefer direct, explicit messages or indirect, implicit messages (Hall, 1976). For example, research across different cultures, including those in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mexico, and the United States, found that participants’ levels of individualism/collectivism directly impacted their conflict styles, with collectivists preferring integrating and compromising approaches and individualists relying on more competing and dominating styles (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Situational factors include the roles you play (daughter/son, boyfriend/girlfriend, employee/boss), your status (manager vs. employee), your communication preferences, and cultural norms and rules that guide your behavior. To illustrate, cultures have different beliefs about how power should be shared amongst the people in the culture, known as **power distance** (Hofstede, 2001). In low-power-distance cultures, such as the United States, power is supposed to be distributed equally, meaning that the culture tries to diminish the differences between low- and high-status individuals. In high-power-distance cultures, it is accepted that power is distributed unequally; thus, people in high-status positions are afforded special treatment and privilege. For example, in the United States, it is considered appropriate for college students to question and, at times, challenge their professors. In high-power-distance cultures, such as in China, it is considered inappropriate and disrespectful for a student to question a professor, even if the professor has made an error. Differences in perceptions of status and power will influence how, why, and with whom we choose to initiate conflict.

By examining perception, goals, outcomes, and facework together, we gain a more complete picture of intercultural conflict—one

that highlights both the challenges and the opportunities for connection across cultural boundaries. Now that you have an understanding of factors that influence the intercultural conflict process, we will turn our attention to exploring conflict styles.

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9.8: Conflict Styles

Table to Score Conflict Style



Figure 9.8.1: Shohei Ohtani shaking hands with a fan.

During the 2025 Major League Baseball season, Japanese-born superstar Shohei Ohtani, of the Los Angeles Dodgers, demonstrated that he was a quiet master of conflict navigation. In two separate incidents involving the San Diego Padres, Ohtani demonstrated a calm, culturally resonant approach to confrontation that defused tension and earned admiration across fan bases.

In the first incident, Ohtani was hit in the back by a 100 MPH fastball—widely interpreted as retaliation in a heated rivalry. Rather than escalate the situation, he waved off his own dugout, signaling that he didn't want the situation to spiral. His response reflected a conflict style often associated with East Asian cultural values: indirectness, emotional control, and a preference for harmony over confrontation.

In the second, he was heckled relentlessly by a Padres fan. Instead of reacting in anger, Ohtani hit a home run in the ninth inning—his 45th of the season—and then walked over to shake the heckler's hand. This gesture, both humorous and humbling, turned a moment of antagonism into one of connection. It showcased a style of conflict resolution that blends assertiveness with grace: responding through action, not argument, and choosing dignity over dominance.

These moments offer a powerful lens for exploring intercultural conflict styles. Whether in sports, classrooms, or workplaces, the way we handle tension reflects deeper cultural scripts. Some cultures value directness and verbal clarity; others prioritize saving face, preserving relationships, or using silence as a form of strength. Ohtani's approach reminds us that conflict doesn't always require confrontation—and that sometimes, the most powerful response is the one that leaves room for respect. Let's turn our attention to exploring different ways of handling conflict.

Intercultural conflict management is the process of identifying and applying strategies to minimize and resolve tensions that arise from culturally influenced goals and communication differences. When we examine how people from different cultural backgrounds negotiate conflict, we often observe consistent patterns of interaction. These patterns are known as **intercultural conflict communication styles**, the verbal and nonverbal approaches individuals use to respond to and work through conflict across cultures (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Your personal conflict style is shaped by a range of factors, including your cultural upbringing, gender norms, age, personality traits, family communication practices, and conflict goals. As discussed earlier in the chapter, culture adds a dynamic layer to the conflict process, influencing what is considered respectful, appropriate, and effective in resolving disagreements.

Your intercultural conflict style reflects a blend of nonverbal cues (such as eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice), the verbal messages you choose, and the degree to which you prioritize your own needs versus those of the other person. For example,

someone from a collectivist, high-context culture may prefer indirect language and harmony-preserving strategies, while someone from an individualistic, low-context culture may favor direct speech and assertive negotiation.

Intercultural communication and conflict experts have developed conflict style models to help individuals better understand their own approaches to managing conflict, as well as the tendencies of others across cultural contexts. Gaining insight into these styles can enhance your ability to navigate disagreements with empathy, adapt your communication strategies, and foster more constructive outcomes in diverse settings.

Before diving into different styles of conflict, it is important to pause, note, and reflect that when we learn information about other cultures, it is easy to generalize and make assumptions. Bradford "J" Hall (2002) eloquently asks us to remember to be mindful and use this knowledge to open our minds and hearts, rather than to limit and generalize:

Sometimes these differences are due to such things are regional and ethnic cultural differences within a larger community, and sometimes they are due to more individual personalities or specific family characteristics. Just as people in your own culture choose various approaches to conflict based on situation and personality, so do people within every culture. This does not mean that certain tendencies do not exist that can help us deal with conflict and provide a base for understanding differences. However, it is important to remind ourselves to be open to variations within every culture and to use our general knowledge in helpful, not limiting, ways. (p. 240).

In this section, we will examine two foundational approaches to conflict styles:

- **The Five-Style Model**, which is based on the dual concern framework, balances concern for self with concern for others. This model includes five distinct styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. It was originally developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and later expanded by Rahim (1983) to include organizational and interpersonal dimensions.
- **The Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS) Model**, developed by Hammer (2005), focuses on two key dimensions of intercultural conflict: directness of communication and emotional expressiveness. This model identifies four styles: discussion, engagement, accommodation, and dynamic, each reflecting different cultural preferences for how

The Five-Style Model

Conflict styles vary across individuals and cultures, and understanding these differences can help us navigate disagreements more effectively. The five-style model of conflict management was originally developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1977) and later expanded by Rahim (1983a, 2001, 2010) to include interpersonal and organizational contexts. This framework is especially useful in intercultural communication, as it provides a clean explanation of different approaches to conflict situations.

The Five-Style Model is based on the underlying premise that your approach to conflict is based on your concern for yourself versus your concern for the other person, which shapes how you approach a conflict, the strategies you use to negotiate, and the outcome you desire (win-win, etc.). Concern for self refers to the degree to which you try to meet your own needs and goals in a conflict situation. Concern for others refers to the degree to which you try to meet the needs of the other person in the conflict. For example, consider scheduling during a major cultural or religious observance. A U.S.-born manager, Sana, shows high concern for others by adjusting shift times and break schedules so that her Muslim team members can observe Ramadan practices comfortably and safely. Her counterpart, Jordan, prioritizes his own preferences and the existing workflow, insisting on standard schedules without accommodation, which reflects a higher concern for self. Various combinations of concern for self versus concern for others result in five conflict management styles, including integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim, 2000). In this section, we examine five approaches to conflict management. Take some time to reflect on your approach to conflict and see if you can identify your style.

Integrating

If you display high concern for your own needs while also honoring the needs of others, you may prefer the integrating style of conflict management (Rahim, 1983a). For example, when Rina, who grew up in India, and her roommate Anne, who is from Canada, disagree about household responsibilities, they view the conflict as a chance to understand each other's expectations. They sit down together, share their perspectives, and work toward a solution that reflects both cultural norms. Integrating—also known as collaborating (Thomas & Kilmann, 1977)—involves problem-solving, open communication, assertiveness, and cooperation (Rahim, 2010). It is especially effective in long-term relationships, intercultural teams, and situations requiring mutual buy-in. However, it may not be practical for minor issues, time-sensitive decisions, or when parties lack the skills or energy for deep problem-solving.

Obliging

Do you ever find yourself sacrificing your needs to maintain harmony in a relationship? Take, for example, Kenji, a Japanese student studying in the U.S., who often goes along with his classmates' decisions during group projects—even when he disagrees. He believes that preserving group unity is more important than asserting his own preferences. This is known as the obliging or accommodating style of conflict management, which reflects high concern for others and low concern for self (Rahim, 1983a). Obliging may be appropriate when the issue matters more to the other person, when preserving harmony is a priority, or when one party has less power. A study of medical professionals found that obliging was associated with lower workplace stress and fewer perceived conflicts (Friedman et al., 2000).

Dominating

Have you ever met someone who insists on being right, even at the expense of others? They may be using the dominating style of conflict management (also known as competing), which emphasizes self-interest over collaboration, competition, and a "right answer" (Rahim, 1983a). For instance, Stephen, a manager from a highly individualistic culture, often overrides his team's input during meetings, believing that strong leadership means making unilateral decisions. This competitive, win-lose approach may be necessary in high-stakes situations—such as legal disputes or emergency decisions—but overuse can damage relationships and leave others feeling unheard (Rahim et al., 2000).

Avoiding

Have you ever chosen not to address a conflict at all? This is known as the avoiding style of conflict management, which involves physical or emotional withdrawal from conflict situations. For example, Lien, a Vietnamese student, feels hurt by her friend's comment but chooses not to bring it up, believing that silence will preserve the friendship. In U.S. culture, avoidance is often viewed negatively, but in many collectivist cultures, it is seen as a respectful way to maintain harmony (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Avoiding may be appropriate when the issue is minor, when emotions are running high, or when confrontation could cause more harm than good. However, it is not ideal when decisions are urgent or when unresolved issues accumulate (Rahim, 2010).

Compromising

In many cultures, compromise is seen as a practical way to resolve conflict. For example, Fatima from Morocco and her friend Elena from Spain often disagree about where to meet for lunch. Rather than arguing, they take turns choosing the location. This reflects the compromising style of conflict management, which balances moderate concern for self and others. Compromise can be effective when both parties have equal power, when time is limited, or when goals are not mutually exclusive. However, it may leave both parties partially dissatisfied and may not work well in situations involving deep values or power imbalances (Rahim, 2001).

Understanding your conflict management style—and recognizing how cultural values shape others' approaches—can help you navigate conflict with greater empathy and effectiveness (Conerly & Tripathi, 2004). No one style is universally best; rather, we should adapt our approach based on the situation, the relationship, and the cultural context. It's also important to remember that conflict styles are perceived differently across cultures, and factors such as gender, age, race, and power dynamics can influence how your style is received (Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Having insight into your own conflict style—and the styles of those around you—can transform frustrating encounters into opportunities for growth. Read on for a review of the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory, which incorporates an intentional focus on communication approaches and emotional expression.

Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory

Another way to understand conflict styles is through the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory, developed by Mitchell Hammer (2005). This framework suggests that when people experience conflict, their responses tend to reflect two key dimensions: the affective, or emotional side, and the cognitive, or analytical side. In moments of disagreement, individuals may react emotionally based on how they interpret the cause of the conflict and the level of threat they perceive. Their approach to managing the situation is shaped by how emotionally expressive they are and how directly they prefer to communicate.

The ICS Inventory identifies two cultural continuums that influence conflict behavior: direct versus indirect communication and

expressive versus restrained emotional style. These dimensions help explain why people from different cultural backgrounds may approach the same conflict in very different ways—some favoring open dialogue and visible emotion, others preferring subtle cues and emotional control.

Direct Approaches

Direct approaches are favored by cultures that view conflict as a natural and even beneficial part of relationships. In these contexts, addressing disagreements openly is seen as a way to strengthen trust and clarify expectations. Communication tends to be explicit, with an emphasis on precise language and clearly defined criteria for resolution. For example, in a multicultural marriage between a German partner and a Brazilian partner, the German spouse may prefer to discuss issues head-on, believing that direct communication builds stronger trust.

Indirect Approaches

Indirect approaches are preferred in cultures that see conflict as potentially harmful to relationships and group harmony. In these settings, people may avoid confrontation and instead rely on subtle cues, silence, or third-party mediation. Preserving face and maintaining consensus are prioritized over direct resolution. In a close-knit Filipino family, a daughter may avoid confronting her parents about a disagreement, choosing instead to ask an aunt to gently raise the issue on her behalf.

Emotionally Expressive Styles

Emotionally expressive cultures value open displays of emotion during conflict. Expressing feelings—through tone, gestures, or passionate language—is seen as a sign of sincerity and commitment to resolving the issue. Sharing emotions builds trust and credibility. To illustrate, during a disagreement between two longtime friends from Italian and American backgrounds, the Italian friend may raise their voice and gesture passionately—not out of anger, but to show they care deeply about the relationship.

Emotionally Restrained Styles

Emotionally restrained cultures believe that conflict should be handled with composure and emotional control. People may internalize their feelings and avoid overt displays of emotion to protect the dignity of all parties involved. Trust is earned through calm, respectful dialogue. In a Japanese workplace, a manager may respond to conflict with quiet reflection and minimal emotional expression, believing that restraint demonstrates professionalism and respect.

Hammer proposes that combinations of the four styles can be used to understand different intercultural conflicts.

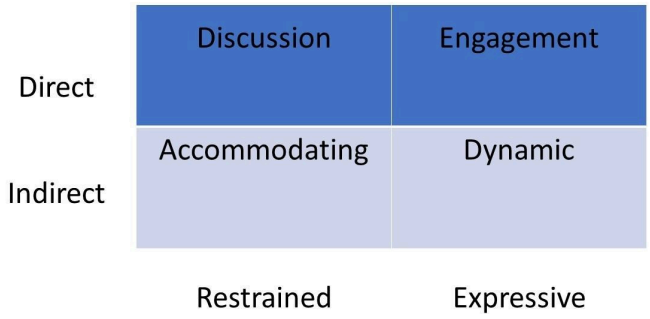


Figure 9.8.2: Hammer's (2005) Intercultural Conflict Inventory

The **discussion style** combines *direct* and *emotionally restrained* dimensions. As it is a verbally direct approach, people who use this style are comfortable expressing disagreements. Perceived strengths of this approach are that it confronts problems, explores arguments, and maintains a calm and logical atmosphere during the conflict. The weaknesses perceived by others are that it is difficult to read "read between the lines," it appears logical but unfeeling, and it can be uncomfortable with emotional

arguments. The discussion style can often be found in Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and various co-cultures in the United States.

The **engagement style** emphasizes a verbally *direct* and *emotionally expressive* approach to dealing with conflict. This style views intense verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotion as demonstrating a willingness to resolve the conflict. Perceived strengths of this approach are that it provides detailed explanations, instructions, and information. This style expresses opinions and shows feelings. The weaknesses perceived by others are the lack of concern with the views and feelings of others, along with the potential for dominating and rude behavior. Individual viewpoints are not separated from emotion. The engagement style is often used in Mediterranean Europe, Russia, Israel, Latin America, and various co-cultures in the United States.

The **accommodating style** combines the *indirect* and *emotionally restrained* approaches. People who use this approach may send an ambiguous message because they believe that by doing so, the conflict will not get out of control. Silence and avoidance are also considered worthy tools. Perceived strengths of this approach are sensitivity to feelings of the other party, control of emotional outbursts, and consideration of alternative meanings of ambiguous messages. Weaknesses as perceived by others are difficulty in voicing your own opinion, appearing to be uncommitted or dishonest, and difficulty in providing explanations. Accommodators tend to avoid direct expression of feelings by using intermediaries, friends, or relatives who informally act on their behalf when dealing with the conflict. Mediation tends to be used in more formal situations when one person believes that conflict will encourage growth in the relationship. The accommodating style is often used in East Asia, North America, and South America.

The **dynamic style** uses indirect communication along with more emotional expressiveness. These people are comfortable with emotions, but tend to speak in metaphors and often use mediators. Their credibility is grounded in their degree of emotional expressiveness. Perceived strengths of this approach are using third parties to gather information and resolve conflicts, being skilled at observing nonverbal behaviors, and being comfortable with emotional displays. Weaknesses as perceived by others are appearing too emotional, unreasonable, and possibly devious, while rarely getting to the point. The dynamic style is often used in the Middle East, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, and various co-cultures in the United States.

Both the Five-Style Model and the Intercultural Styles Inventory offer useful frameworks for understanding conflict. They help individuals recognize not only their own preferred styles but also the approaches of those they interact with. A key insight from these models is that there is no single “right” way to manage conflict. Instead, effective communicators learn to adapt to others, adjust their strategies to fit the needs of the situation, and reflect on how their choices may influence the outcome. Check out the Cultural Close-Up below to identify your intercultural conflict style. In the next section, we will turn to strategies for fostering peaceful intercultural conflict resolution.

Cultural Close-Up

Activity: What Is Your Intercultural Conflict Style?

Now that you have reviewed the Intercultural Conflict Style (ICS) Model, it is time to reflect on your own approach to conflict. Below are five intercultural conflict scenarios. For each, read the four possible responses and choose the one that is closest to how you would likely respond. Your answer should reflect what you think you would do, not what you think you should do. Keep track of your choices for each item.

Scenario 1: Group Project Tension

You are working on a group project with classmates from different cultural backgrounds. One member has not contributed much, and the deadline is approaching. How do you respond?

1. Calmly and directly explain what tasks still need to be done and ask them to take responsibility.
2. Express your frustration openly, telling them it’s unfair and that the group needs them to step up.
3. Avoid direct confrontation, but quietly take on more of the work yourself to keep harmony.
4. Drop hints about the workload imbalance, using humor or side comments to signal your frustration.

Scenario 2: Workplace Feedback

Your supervisor from another culture gives you vague feedback that your “communication style could improve.” How do you respond?

1. Ask for specific examples and clarify exactly what changes are expected.
2. Show your concern by asking directly and with strong emotion, making it clear you want to improve.
3. Accept the feedback without pressing for details, assuming you'll figure it out over time.
4. Respond with visible emotion (tone, gestures) but without asking directly, hoping they'll elaborate.

Scenario 3: Family Gathering

At a holiday dinner, a guest makes a comment about your cultural traditions that feels dismissive. How do you respond?

1. Calmly explain why the tradition matters to you and provide context.
2. Challenge the comment directly, showing your passion and frustration.
3. Say nothing in the moment, but later avoid sharing those traditions with that guest.
4. Use humor, sarcasm, or storytelling to indirectly show your disapproval.

Scenario 4: Roommate Conflict

Your roommate plays loud music late at night, disrupting your sleep. How do you respond?

1. Directly but calmly ask them to lower the volume after a certain hour.
2. Knock on their door and tell them firmly (and emotionally) that it's keeping you from sleeping.
3. Say nothing, but try to adjust your own schedule or use earplugs.
4. Drop hints—like sighing loudly or making jokes about "night owls"—to signal your frustration.

Scenario 5: Classroom Debate

During a heated class discussion, a peer strongly disagrees with your perspective. How do you respond?

1. Present your points clearly and logically, keeping your tone calm.
2. Defend your position passionately, raising your voice and showing conviction.
3. Avoid further debate, letting the other person have the last word.
4. Use expressive gestures, stories, or indirect comments to make your point without direct confrontation.

Results

Tally up the number of A, B, C, and D answers you selected. Your answers indicate your intercultural conflict style:

- **Mostly A (Discussion Style – Direct + Restrained):** You value clarity and logic, preferring calm, direct communication.
- **Mostly B (Engagement Style – Direct + Expressive):** You are passionate and direct, showing emotion to emphasize sincerity.
- **Mostly C (Accommodation Style – Indirect + Restrained):** You prioritize harmony, using subtle communication and minimizing emotion.
- **Mostly D (Dynamic Style – Indirect + Expressive):** You rely on stories, humor, or indirect cues, often expressing emotion while avoiding direct confrontation.
- **Mixed answers:** You may be flexible, adapting your style depending on the situation and cultural context.

Discussion and Reflection

As we can see from these scenarios, people approach conflict in different ways depending on cultural values and personal preferences. Understanding your own intercultural conflict style—and recognizing the styles of others—can help you adapt and respond more effectively.

Reflect on the following:

- What are the potential strengths of your preferred style?
- What are the potential challenges or misunderstandings that might arise from your style in intercultural contexts?
- Which style would you like to develop further to improve your intercultural communication skills?

Self-Assessment Chart

1. Count how many **A, B, C, and D** responses you selected.
2. Record your totals in the chart below:

Conflict Styles

Style	Your Total	Interpretation
Discussion (A)	___	You prefer calm, direct, and logical approaches.
Engagement (B)	___	You value directness and emotional expressiveness.
Accommodation (C)	___	You prioritize harmony and minimize open conflict.
Dynamic (D)	___	You rely on indirect, expressive strategies to manage t

Interpreting Your Results

- **Majority in one style** → This is your dominant intercultural conflict style.
- **Mixed results** → You may be flexible, adapting your approach depending on the situation and cultural context.
- **Balanced across all four** → You likely shift styles fluidly, which can be a strength in diverse intercultural settings.

Takeaway: This chart is not about labeling yourself permanently but about raising awareness. Recognizing your default style helps you understand how others might perceive you and how you can adapt when working across cultures.

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9.9: Growing Your Intercultural Conflict Management Skills



Figure 9.9.1: German Chancellor Angela Merkel and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Arden

As we have seen throughout this chapter, intercultural conflict is a dynamic and sometimes frustrating experience, shaped by culture, perception, goals, desired outcomes, communication preferences, linguistic differences, and values (Taguchi, 2023). Because of this complexity, individuals need knowledge, motivation, and practical skills to resolve conflicts in ways that are both peaceful and effective. In the pages ahead, we will explore communication strategies you can use to negotiate and resolve conflicts, along with a step-by-step model that will serve as a guide for working through intercultural conflicts constructively.

Mindfulness

Approach conflict with mindfulness. Mindfulness means being present in the moment with heightened awareness of your thoughts, emotions, and communication behaviors. This is especially important when cultural differences are part of the conflict, as it reminds us to be attentive to diverse approaches and expectations. One way to practice mindfulness is to consider how you open a conflict conversation—your tone of voice, word choice, and overall message. For example, Jordan knows her family enjoys lively, assertive debates, a style that can feel intimidating to her friends. When addressing conflicts with friends or co-workers, she makes a conscious effort to use a considerate tone and choose words carefully. A gentle start often makes the other person more willing to listen.

Mindful Listening

Mindful listening is one of the most important skills for building healthy relationships and managing conflict. Whenever possible, be the first to listen: encourage the other party to share their perspective, and then paraphrase what you hear. This slows the pace of conflict and fosters mutual understanding. In situations where you must initiate the discussion, speak first, but then invite feedback and demonstrate that you are open to hearing their response.

Perception Checking

Understanding the source of a conflict requires checking your perceptions of both the situation and the other person's feelings. Culturally sensitive perception-checking combines observation with interpretive questions to avoid assumptions (Ting-Toomey &

Chung, 2012). For example, imagine Laura and her sister-in-law Raquel are planning an anniversary party. Laura notices Raquel is unusually quiet and assumes she may be upset. Instead of jumping to conclusions, Laura might say: *"I noticed you've been quiet today (observation). Are you feeling stressed about the planning? Or are you upset with me because I ordered flowers without checking with you? Please tell me how you are feeling."* This approach opens the door for clarification and reduces misunderstanding.

Being Unconditionally Constructive

Regardless of how the other party approaches the conflict, commit to being unconditionally constructive. This means following principles of ethical communication: honoring yourself, the other person, and the relationship, while avoiding behaviors that cause harm (Fisher et al., 2011). We cannot control how others respond, but we can control our own choices. Being unconditionally constructive involves steering clear of personal attacks, offensive language, threats, and blame, and instead focusing on respectful, solution-oriented dialogue.

Bracketing

Conflicts often expand to include multiple issues, including past grievances. Bracketing is the practice of breaking the conflict into smaller, more manageable parts. For example, you might say: *"What is the most pressing issue for us right now? We can return to the other concerns later, but let's focus on this one first."* Narrowing the scope increases the likelihood of resolving problems effectively.

Cultural Empathy

Cultural empathy is "the learned ability of the participants to understand accurately the self-experiences of others from diverse cultures, and concurrently, the ability to convey their understanding responsively and effectively to reach the 'cultural ears' of the culturally different others in the conflict situation" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 201). Practicing cultural empathy involves several steps:

- Cultural Self-Awareness: Acknowledge your own cultural biases and how your norms shape your approach to conflict. Ask yourself: *"How does my culture train me to view this disagreement?"*
- Culturally Sensitive Perspective-Taking: Intentionally seek knowledge of the other person's culture to better understand their values and perspective.
- Mindful Listening: Apply active listening skills to ensure their voice is heard.
- Validation: Acknowledge the emotional reality of their experience, e.g., *"I can see this situation feels stressful and frustrating for you."*
- Adaptation: Adjust your communication style, pace, and problem-solving approach to be culturally appropriate, such as opting for a private conversation instead of a public discussion.

Intercultural conflict can be challenging, but it also offers opportunities for growth, empathy, and connection. By practicing mindfulness, listening actively, checking perceptions, and staying unconditionally constructive, we can approach disagreements with clarity and care. Tools like bracketing and cultural empathy help us navigate complex situations with respect for both our own values and those of others.

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9.10: Conclusion

As we close this chapter, take a moment to reflect on how your understanding of conflict has evolved. We began by distinguishing intercultural conflict from interpersonal conflict, recognizing that culture adds layers of complexity to how we perceive, engage with, and resolve tension. We explored how perception, communication preferences, goals, and outcomes shape conflict dynamics, and how Face-Negotiation Theory helps us understand the role of identity and face needs in these moments. Through the Thomas-Kilmann model and Hammer's Intercultural Conflict Style framework, we considered how our cultural orientations influence the way we respond to conflict. Finally, we practiced communication skills that support peaceful, constructive engagement. With this foundation, you're now equipped to approach conflict not just with knowledge, but with a deeper sense of empathy, flexibility, and purpose—ready to navigate differences in ways that honor both your values and those of others.

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10: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS- CONNECTING ACROSS CULTURES

Learning Objectives

- Define intercultural relationships and identify impact on belonging, identity, and connection
- Describe the benefits and challenges of intercultural relationships
- Identify different types of intercultural relationships and the unique cultural dynamics of each type
- Understand different communication skills to promote healthy intercultural relationships

10.1: Introduction- Intercultural Relationships and Communication

10.2: How Relationships Shape Identity, Connection, and Belonging

10.3: Your Global Advantage- The Benefits of Cross-Cultural Connection

10.4: When Things Get Tricky- Challenges of Intercultural Love and Friendship

10.5: Where Do We Connect? Friendships, Love, and Family Across Borders

10.5.1: Dating and Love- When Cultures and Romance Collide

10.5.2: Intersectional Intimacy- Culture, Identity, and LGBTQ+ Relationships

10.5.3: Interracial Relationships

10.5.4: Home, Heritage, and History- Communication in Intercultural Families

10.6: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills for Successful Relationships

10.7: Conclusion

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10.1: Introduction- Intercultural Relationships and Communication



Figure 10.1.1: Prince Harry and Megan Markle on their wedding day.

When Meghan Markle married Prince Harry in 2018, their union was more than a royal celebration, it was a deeply symbolic moment that brought intercultural relationships into the global spotlight. Meghan, a biracial American actress, entered a centuries-old British royal family steeped in tradition, hierarchy, and cultural expectations. As their relationship unfolded publicly, conversations about race, identity, and belonging surged across the world. As outsiders, we don't really know what their relationship is like, but their story revealed both the beauty and the complexity of navigating love across cultural lines, and how shared values like compassion, commitment, and advocacy can bridge even the widest divides. From the public eye, their relationship has not always been easy, but they've used their platform to challenge traditional norms, speak openly about mental health, and champion equality. Their relationship reminds us that whether intercultural or not, relationships can be rewarding, dynamic, and challenging, all at the same time. They shape how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we imagine a more inclusive world.

According to the Harvard Study on Development(opens in new window) (ongoing since 1938), the single most important factor contributing to our overall well-being is our relationships with others, including family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. To anyone reading this who can identify a BFF, or that person who has your back, or the love or your life, the results of the study won't surprise you. The study found that our relationships contribute to our overall happiness, protecting our mental health, and increasing our personal resilience. While we know that relationships are essential to our overall happiness and well-being, it is important to recognize that changes in our communities and workplaces make it likely that many of these relationships will fall into the category of "intercultural relationships" or relationships where important and significant ethnic and cultural differences exist. Take a quiet moment to pause and think about the relationships that truly matter to you, the ones that have shaped your life, lifted your spirit, or helped you grow. If someone asked you to describe these connections, what would you say? What makes them feel meaningful, comforting, or unforgettable?

Look, relationships are not always going to be easy, but they are worth investing in because they can bring understanding, connection, and enrichment to our lives. In this chapter, we'll explore intercultural relationships across three domains: friendship, romantic partnerships, and family ties. We'll examine the benefits and barriers associated with these relationships, and we'll introduce communication strategies to help navigate them with respect and understanding. Let's first explore how relationships shape our identity and help fulfill needs for connection and belonging.

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10.2: How Relationships Shape Identity, Connection, and Belonging



Figure 10.2.1: Painted Hands Forming a Heart. Google Generate Image

Ubuntu is a South African philosophy rooted in shared humanity, compassion, and interconnectedness. One of its central sayings, “I am because we are,” highlights the importance of relationships—not only in shaping personal identity but also in cultivating a sense of belonging. This saying is similar to a saying in the United States that parents often tell their kids, “show me who your friends are and you show me who you are.” Whether spoken in a South African village or an American kitchen, these words echo a universal truth: we are never just individuals, we are part of each other.This idea reflects how our relationships influence our identity, namely how we see ourselves and how others see us. As you learned in Chapter 3, we all carry multiple identities, including cultural, ethnic, gender, and generational identities.

Identity

The Communication Theory of Identity (Hecht, 2002) builds on this idea by proposing that our relationships are the foundation of how we develop and express identity. According to the theory, relationships, identity, and communication intertwine in four key ways. First, we begin to shape our identity by internalizing how we think others perceive us. Second, we define ourselves through our relationships—such as with best friends, mentors, or significant others. Third, our identities often overlap and co-exist; for example, someone can be both a student and a sibling, or a daughter and a doctor. Finally, a relationship itself can become an identity, as when others see us as part of a couple, a team, or a family unit. Take a moment to apply this to your own life and reflect on how your relationships have come to form your identity.

To illustrate, consider a German-American woman, Susie, married to a Japanese-American man, Glen. Their relationship has deeply shaped how she sees herself, not just through her own lens, but through his. He sees her as brilliant, witty, and occasionally forgetful about what’s on the calendar. Through his eyes, she’s come to embrace her identity not only as a spouse, but also as a mother to their Japanese-German-American children, a cultural bridge between families, and lover of all things related to the LA Dodgers.

Her role as a wife and mother is central, but it doesn’t stand alone. It coexists with other identities: dog-breeder, friend, amazing gardener, and intercultural translator of idioms and expectations. Their relationship itself has become part of her public identity—others often see them as a unit, a team navigating two cultural worlds with humor, respect, and a shared love of dim sum and apple strudel.

When we feel seen and understood in our relationships, we’re not just shaping who we are—we’re also building a sense of

belonging that supports our emotional well-being. But what happens when those relationships are missing or feel shallow? Many people, especially young adults, struggle with loneliness, even in a world that's more digitally connected than ever. The American Psychological Association Healthy Minds Poll (2024) found that 1 in 3 Americans report feeling lonely at least once a week, with young adults ages 18–34 reporting the highest rates. Factors like the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased reliance on technology have made it harder to form deep, lasting connections. Read on to better understand how relationships foster connection in our lives.

Relational Connection

Relational connection refers to the emotional and interpersonal bond formed between individuals through mutual understanding, empathy, and meaningful communication. It's the sense of being seen, heard, and valued in a relationship, often built through shared experiences, vulnerability, and support. Intercultural friendships have been found to be deep sources of connection, providing a safe space to share thoughts and feelings, as well as discuss deeply personal matters such as religion (Kastner, 2022). These relational connections do more than foster interpersonal understanding, they fulfill a deeper psychological need. Take a moment to pause and think about the connections in your life–what relationships reflect your strongest connections? Often our deepest connections also provide us with a sense of belonging. Although we don't always label these relationships, it is common to do so, whether referring to our best friends, boyfriend or girlfriend, sister and brother, and so on. These strong connections often lay the groundwork for a deeper sense of belonging. Think of the friend who remembers your favorite coffee drink or the sibling who shares memories of your childhood. These are the relationships that make us feel truly understood.

Belonging

Researchers have identified relationships as essential for promoting a sense of belonging. A sense of belonging refers to feeling included, accepted for who you are, and like one is part of a shared dyad or group. Although a sense of connection and belonging go hand in hand, you can experience connection without belonging, and vice-versa. Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed the Belongingness Hypothesis, which stresses that we have an inherent need to form and maintain quality relationships. Having a strong sense of belonging has been linked to better physical and mental health, stronger confidence, and lower levels of anxiety and loneliness. Belonging might show up in our communication in small moments, like being invited to a group chat, having your pronouns respected, or being asked to join a family tradition. These gestures signal that you're not just included, you're valued.

While identity, relational connection, and belonging offer profound emotional and psychological benefits that are fostered through communication, the path to cultivating these experiences, especially across cultures, is not always straightforward. Intercultural relationships bring unique opportunities for growth, but they also present distinct challenges that require intentional communication.

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10.3: Your Global Advantage- The Benefits of Cross-Cultural Connection

While studying abroad in Brazil, *Emily*, a U.S. college student, became close friends with *Maria*, a Brazilian student in her sociology class. At first, Emily felt frustrated when Maria arrived late to their meetups or responded to texts hours later. Back home, Emily was used to tightly scheduled plans and quick replies, she saw punctuality as a sign of respect.

But over time, through honest conversations and shared experiences, Emily began to understand that Maria's approach to time wasn't careless, it was cultural. Maria explained that in Brazil, time is often viewed more flexibly, with a greater emphasis on relationships than rigid schedules. People prioritize being present with others, even if that means arriving late to the next commitment.

This friendship helped Emily shift her perspective. She became more patient, more present, and more aware of how cultural values shape everyday behaviors. As she put it later, "I didn't learn about cultural differences from a textbook or a tour, I learned it from Maria."

Intercultural relationships, whether friendships, romantic partnerships, or even roommate dynamics, can be incredibly meaningful. They often help us see the world through someone else's eyes and challenge us to grow in how we communicate and connect. But like any relationship, they come with both benefits and challenges. Before diving into the specifics of intercultural dynamics, take a moment to reflect: What makes a relationship feel rewarding to you? What kinds of misunderstandings or tensions have you experienced with family, friends, or partners, even when you share the same background? These everyday experiences can help us better understand what's at stake when culture adds another layer to how we relate to one another. Let's first explore the benefits of intercultural relationships.



Figure 9.1.1: Friends walking through the Marketplace in Jiufen, Taiwan.

10.3.1 Increasing Cultural Knowledge

The benefits of intercultural relationships span differences in gender, age, ethnicity, race, class, nationality, religion, and much more. The moment you begin an intercultural relationship, is the moment you begin to learn more about the world. You will start experiencing new foods, listen to new music, learn a new game, practice a new sport, acquire new words or a new dialect, or read new literature that you might never have had access to before. In some ways you gain a new "history" as you learn what it means to belong to a new cultural group. Hearing a friend or family member describing their lived experience or stories is often much more compelling or "real" than knowledge gained in school or on television.

10.3.2 Learning New Skills

The difficulties involved in intercultural relationships may help you acquire new skills. According to Docan-Morgan (2015), the skills we develop in all relationships are exaggerated in intercultural relationships. Our diverse friends and loved ones teach us much about the world that we have yet to explore—through language, music, religion, and other cultural expressions. Docan-Morgan postulates that our newfound understanding of one culture will likely make it easier to relate and feel close to people from many different walks of life. In other words, our intercultural relationships result in new insights and new ways of thinking that we can apply to every relationship.

In addition to enhancing our listening and adaptability, intercultural relationships often cultivate cultural empathy—the ability to genuinely understand and appreciate another person's worldview—and cultural humility, which involves recognizing the limits of our own perspective and approaching others with openness and respect. These skills are not only valuable in navigating cultural differences but also in fostering deeper, more compassionate communication across all areas of life.



Figure 9.1.2: Learning how to make Argan Oil in Morocco.

10.3.3 Changing Attitudes Towards Different Cultures

Intercultural relationships can help us be more mindful of our attitudes and approaches towards others who are culturally different. In one study of college students and graduates in Australia, it was found that there was agreement that open and respectful communication in the "early stages of the friendship formation onwards, led to increased culture-specific knowledge, understanding and awareness" (Kastner, 2022, p. 34). This increased knowledge and awareness led individuals to change their attitudes to other groups of people. This brings us to a critical benefit of intercultural relationships: their power to help us break down stereotypes and move toward more inclusive, informed ways of seeing the world.



Figure 9.1.3: Two friends having coffee.

10.3.4 Challenging Previously Held Stereotypes

Intercultural relationships also help us rethink stereotypes we might hold. Martin and Nakayama (2025) point out that the differences we perceive with our partners tend to be more noticeable in the early stages of the relationship. As we learned in the chapter on barriers to intercultural communication, stereotypes occur when we form preconceived notions about other people based on what we believe their group membership to be. Because these differences can seem overwhelming, the challenge is to discover the things both partners have in common and build on those similarities to strengthen the relationship. The suffering that one or both partners have gone through at the hands of prejudice can be addressed, and a healing effect can grow and thrive as relational partners learn that their prejudices have little to do with the thriving relationship being built.

For example, when Olivier, a Belgian software engineer, began dating Amina, a Kenyan graduate student, he realized how many unconscious stereotypes he had absorbed over the years—about Africa, about gender roles, and even about what "compatibility" should look like. At first, he found their cultural differences disorienting: Amina's communal approach to family, her spiritual practices, and her candid communication style challenged his assumptions. But as their relationship deepened, Olivier began to see these differences not as barriers, but as invitations to grow. He started asking more questions, listening with curiosity, and reflecting on his own cultural lens. Over time, his attitudes toward African cultures and toward intercultural relationships in general shifted from cautious skepticism to genuine appreciation.

Stories like Olivier and Amina's show how intercultural relationships can be powerful catalysts for personal growth and social change. They don't just challenge stereotypes—they help dismantle them through lived experience, empathy, and connection. Now that we have learned about some of the benefits of intercultural relationships, let's turn our attention to some of the challenges.

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10.4: When Things Get Tricky- Challenges of Intercultural Love and Friendship

Luis, a Latino student from Los Angeles, and Yi-Joon, a South Korean exchange student, were randomly paired as college roommates. Both were excited to learn from each other's cultures, Luis admired Yi-Joon's gaming skills, while Yi-Joon appreciated Luis's warmth and humor. They bonded over late-night study sessions and swapped stories about growing up in different worlds.

But soon, small tensions surfaced. Luis was puzzled when Yi-Joon avoided eye contact during serious talks, while Yi-Joon felt overwhelmed by Luis's directness. Language barriers led to confusion, especially with slang, and their food preferences clashed: Luis's spicy tacos and Yi-Joon's fermented kimchi sparked more than one fridge negotiation.

Despite these bumps, their friendship grew stronger through honest conversations and shared curiosity. They learned to laugh at misunderstandings, ask questions, and respect each other's boundaries. As Luis later joked, "I didn't know fermented cabbage could teach me so much about patience."

Intercultural relationships like theirs show that connection across differences takes effort, empathy, and a sense of humor. These challenges aren't roadblocks, they can be viewed as opportunities for growth. Let's explore some common challenges in intercultural relationships and how to navigate them with care.



Figure 10.4.1: A couple having an argument in their apartment.

10.4.1 Different Expectations

A communication expectation is like a personal belief about how people should interact in different situations. Our culture plays a huge role in shaping these expectations, along with other personal touches like our gender, age, religion, and all the experiences we've had. According to Burgoon's Expectancy Violations Theory (2015), every culture has its own special ways of doing things, and when those norms are gently bent, like with differences in eye contact, personal space, or how direct we are, people might interpret the behavior in a positive or not-so-positive way, depending on the situation and the relationship.

For instance, imagine two colleagues from different backgrounds meeting for the first time at a workshop. One greets the other with a warm hug, while the other was expecting a friendly handshake. This unexpected gesture creates a little moment of surprise, and how it's received really depends on their cultural norms, the setting, and how they connect with each other. By understanding these wonderful, culturally rooted expectations and how people respond when they're challenged, we can improve

our communication, clear up misunderstandings, and build more respectful, flexible, and heartfelt relationships across cultures.

10.4.2 Underestimating the Impact of Culture

People in intercultural or interracial relationships often downplay or underestimate the impact of culture. As we have learned previously in this text, we often take culture for granted and we assume our way of living and communicating is the "norm". However, when we develop close relationships with people from different cultures we learn different perspectives on communication and relationships. For example, when Michael and Reyna first started dating, he was surprised by how often her family called, visited, and weighed in on her decisions, he assumed they were just overly involved. But over time, he realized that Reyna, who comes from a close-knit Filipino household, saw family as a central source of support, not interference. What once felt overwhelming to Michael eventually became something he respected, and even appreciated, about her cultural values.

10.4.3 Competing Cultural Values

Friends, romantic partners, and families with a blending of different cultures may experience competing cultural values. Disagreements over topics such as religion, love, feelings, and boundaries can become common. To illustrate, when Alicia, who is Black and Baptist, and her husband Daniel, who is white and Jewish, became parents, they had to confront deeply held values regarding how they would raise their children. This conflict took on a life of its own because both sets of grandparents also had very strong opinions about how their grand-children should be raised. The life shift meant navigating old family expectations without defaulting to “what we grew up with.” To further understand how cultural values may impact relationships, check out the next challenges, exploring competing needs of individualism and collectivism.

10.4.4 Differences in Preferences for Individualism and Collectivism

Not only can our cultural values be a source of challenge and conflict in intercultural relationships, but our adherence to broad cultural patterns can shape our views towards relationships. One of the most influential orientations is our preference for individualism and collectivism. If you recall from Chapter 3, individualism and collectivism explains the degree to which we prefer an individual versus a group orientation in our lives.

For example, Priya, who grew up in a collectivist Indian household, often felt torn when her American husband, Jake, emphasized personal boundaries and independence, especially when it came to family decisions. While Jake valued privacy and autonomy, Priya felt that involving her extended family was a sign of love and respect. Their differing expectations led to misunderstandings, especially around holidays and childcare, until they began to openly discuss how their cultural values shaped their views on connection and commitment.

Cultural Close-Up

The dimension of individualism and collectivism can play a significant role in our relationships, influencing everything from need for privacy and independence, to how we communicate and express our emotions. Here’s a helpful summary of relationship needs based on individualism and collectivism (Adapted from Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012):

Individualism and Collectivism in Relationships

Individualism	Collectivism
High autonomy	High connection
Privacy needs	Family connection needs
Voluntary commitment	Family commitment

Individualism	Collectivism
Low context communication	High context communication
Low context emotions	High context emotions

Discussion Questions

1. **“Roommates, Texts, and TMI”**
   Imagine you’re living with a roommate from a culture that values high privacy and low-context communication, while you come from a culture that emphasizes high connection and high-context communication. What kinds of misunderstandings might pop up? How would you navigate them without turning your dorm into a drama zone?
2. **“Family First… or Me First?”**
   Think about a time when your personal goals or independence clashed with family expectations—or imagine a friend in that situation. How might someone from a collectivist culture approach that conflict differently than someone from an individualist culture? What would “success” look like in each case?
3. **“Decode This!”**
   You’re texting a friend who always uses emojis, inside jokes, and vague hints to express how they feel. You, on the other hand, prefer to say exactly what’s on your mind. How might your different emotional styles (low vs. high context) affect your friendship—and how could you meet in the middle?

While frameworks like individualism and collectivism help us understand broad differences, relationships also challenge us to negotiate the more subtle, day-to-day perceived differences between ourselves and our partners.

10.4.5 Perceived Differences

While it is not uncommon to have different expectations from time to time, relationships also provide an opportunity to uncover differences about our friends and romantic partners, some of which we may find charming and others challenging. And while it is normal for people in romantic and friend relationships to perceive differences, when we add cultural and ethnic differences, we may find some surprising cultural differences.

As we explored earlier in this course, the *similarities-differences dialectic* (Martin & Nakayama, 2025) reminds us that relationships are shaped by both shared experiences and distinct perspectives. This dialectic can present challenges to relationship development, especially when cultural differences are more visible than commonalities. Yet with mindful communication, we can begin to uncover shared values, goals, and ways of relating that might not be immediately obvious.

Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty that might not be present in intracultural relationships. People experience anxiety or fear about the possible negative consequences of their actions or from being uncertain how to act towards a person from a different culture. Some form of anxiety always exists in the early stages of any relationship, but being worried about offending someone or looking incompetent is more pronounced in intercultural relationships. The level of anxiety may even be higher if people have previous negative experiences. Once some similarities are found, the tension within the dialectic begins to balance out and uncertainty and anxiety lessen.

As communicators, we can reframe differences not as a threat, but as an invitation to grow. When we approach intercultural relationships with curiosity, humility, and openness, we create space for deeper connection. Over time, as we discover points of similarity and learn to appreciate difference, the tension within the dialectic begins to soften. Anxiety can decrease, and the relationship becomes a source of enrichment, insight, and joy. However, it is important to be aware that unchecked perceptions can lead to racism, prejudice, and stereotypes.

10.4.5 Facing Racism, Prejudice, and Stereotypes

Racism, prejudice, and stereotypes can be both hurtful and harmful, and the unexpected prejudice people experience when

forming intercultural relationships can catch people off guard. When forming relationships with people who are ethnically, racially, or culturally different, they may receive negative feedback from strangers as well as family and friends. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2021) note that family and friend reactions can range from support, to acceptance, to rejection, to fear and hostility. Negative stereotypes are powerful, and often take a conscious effort to detect. They can hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs.

10.4.6 Motivation

Building a relationship takes effort and investments; building across cultural boundaries may take extra motivation and —because intercultural relationships often require more effort to nurture and sustain. We're not just connecting with another person; we're also navigating layers of values, beliefs, and behaviors that may need to be explained to ourselves, to each other, and sometimes to our communities. Take Demi, a Chinese-Canadian woman, who shared that in high school, she only wanted to date men who looked like the actor Paul Walker. But as she began dating outside her cultural background, she quickly realized that every difference, food, family expectations, and communication styles, came with questions. Over time, the constant need to explain became emotionally exhausting.

What does friendship look like in this culture? What are the expectations in a romantic relationship? Who needs to approve the relationship? Why would we want to be friends? What taboos might we be crossing? And how do we handle the potential questioning, or even pushback, from our own cultural group? These are not easy questions, and the process of answering them takes time, patience, and emotional energy. For some, this extra layer of effort can feel overwhelming. For others, it becomes a meaningful part of the journey.

10.4.7 Language and Nonverbal Barriers and Communication Breakdowns

One of the most immediate and tangible challenges in intercultural relationships is navigating language barriers and the communication breakdowns that can result. As seen in the opening example with Luis and Yi-Joon, even with good intentions, differences in language, slang, and nonverbal cues can lead to misunderstandings. Luis was puzzled by Yi-Joon's avoidance of eye contact during serious talks, while Yi-Joon felt overwhelmed by Luis's directness. These seemingly small differences can accumulate, creating friction and frustration if not addressed with patience and a willingness to understand.

Beyond literal language differences, communication styles themselves vary greatly across cultures. Some cultures favor high-context communication, where much of the meaning is embedded in the context, nonverbal cues, and shared understanding, rather than explicit verbal statements. Other cultures prefer low-context communication, where messages are direct, explicit, and rely heavily on words. When individuals from these differing communication styles interact, misinterpretations are common. What one person perceives as direct and clear, another might see as blunt or even rude. Conversely, what one person considers subtle and polite, another might find vague or evasive. Overcoming these barriers often involves active listening, asking clarifying questions, and a mutual commitment to finding common ground in how messages are sent and received.

10.4.8 Identity Negotiation: The Ultimate Challenge and Reward

Intercultural relationships inherently involve a process of identity negotiation, where individuals from different cultural backgrounds work to understand, affirm, and integrate their diverse identities within the context of their relationship. This concept is central to Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012), which emphasizes that people strive for a sense of secure, distinctive, and authentic identity in their interactions. In intercultural relationships, this negotiation is particularly complex as partners navigate not only their personal identities but also their cultural identities. It's the most profound challenge of these relationships, because it is constant.

This process often involves a degree of cultural compromise, where partners adapt their behaviors, beliefs, and values to accommodate each other. This isn't about one person abandoning their culture, but rather finding ways to integrate and respect both cultural frameworks. For example, Natalie and Daniel, in deciding how to raise their children, had to negotiate their Baptist and Jewish traditions. This required open dialogue and a willingness to find a shared path that honored both their individual and cultural identities, rather than defaulting to one over the other.

When friends, family, and co-workers engage in this negotiation with respect and genuine curiosity, the relationship can become a rich tapestry woven from diverse cultural threads, leading to a stronger, more resilient bond. It's a journey of continuous learning, where both individuals grow in their understanding of themselves and each other, ultimately creating a unique shared identity that celebrates their cultural complexities.

It’s not impossible for an intercultural relationship to work out. What's critical is to affirm the other person’s cultural identity. We need to recognize that the other person might have different values, beliefs, and behaviors which form both their individual and cultural identities. This requires being open-minded, being interested, being respectful, realizing the similarities, avoiding making assumptions, and celebrating the differences. Intercultural relationships have real challenges, but if things work out, they can be amazing.

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10.5: WHERE DO WE CONNECT? FRIENDSHIPS, LOVE, AND FAMILY ACROSS BORDERS

10.5 Where Do We Connect? Friendships, Love, and Family Across Borders

Intercultural relationships are formed between people with different cultural identities and include romantic partners, friends, family, and coworkers. Martin and Nakamura (2025) do not limit intercultural relationships to people of different ethnicities, nationalities, or races, but also include gender, age, and physical abilities. Although the term “relationship” is often associated with romance, intercultural relationships can be as varied as the people within them. Colleagues performing a work-related task can develop a friendship. Marrying into a family creates strong familial ties. Eating at the same family-run restaurant each week builds loyalty. This section will explore two of the most common types of intercultural relationships: friendships and romantic relationships.



Figure 10.5.1.1: A group of boys who are friends at school

10.5.1 BFF's Across Borders

Friendship is a unique and important type of interpersonal relationship that constitutes a significant portion of a person’s social life from early childhood all the way through to late adulthood (Rawlins, 1992). Friendship is distinguished from other types of relationships by its “voluntary” nature. In other words, friendship occurs when individuals are relatively free from obligatory ties, duties, and other expectations (Fischer, 1975). Due to changes in technology and social media, people may find themselves building friendships with people on the other side of the world, often based on shared interests. As you read through this next section pause to reflect on the important friendships in your life, including the past and present.

Friendships, especially those that cross cultural or racial lines, often reflect the dynamic interplay of values, expectations, and shared experiences. Rawlins (1992) developed a typology of friendships that has stood the test of time and provides a valuable understanding of intercultural/interracial relationships through several dimensions, including duration, purpose, disclosure, and obligation.

Cultural Close-Up

Birds of a Feather Flock Together

"Birds of a feather flock together" still rings true for a significant portion of the population (Pew Research Institute, 2023). For those of us living in ethnically diverse states, these patterns may come as a surprise — especially when we consider how often we interact with people from different backgrounds in schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

- Racial/Ethnic Homogeneity in Close Friends: A majority of adults (63%) say all or most of their close friends are the same race or ethnicity as them (as of 2023). This varies by group:
  - White adults are most likely to say all or most of their close friends share their race or ethnicity (70%).
  - Black adults (62%).
  - Asian adults (52%).
  - Hispanic adults (47%).
- Racial Composition of Core Social Networks (approximate data from 2022 studies):
  - Among White Americans' core social networks, an average of 90% of the people are also White. 67% of White Americans have networks that are entirely White.
  - Among Black Americans' core social networks, an average of 78% of the people are also Black. 46% of Black Americans have networks that are entirely Black.
  - Among Hispanic Americans' core social networks, an average of 63% of the people are also Hispanic, while about 26% are White. 37% of Hispanics report having a social network that is entirely Hispanic.
- Age Trend: Adults under 30 were the *least* likely age group to report that all or most of their close friends share their race or ethnicity (53%), compared to 70% of adults 65 and older.

Take a moment to think about your own close friendships. Do most of your friends share your racial or ethnic background? Why do you think that is?

Discussion Questions

1. **"Comfort Zones or Communication Gaps?"**
   Why do you think so many people—despite living in diverse communities—still form close friendships mostly within their own racial or ethnic group? How might communication styles, cultural norms, or unspoken assumptions play a role in shaping who we feel comfortable connecting with?

2. **"The Diversity Illusion"**
   In schools or workplaces, we often interact with people from many backgrounds. But does interaction always lead to meaningful connections? What kinds of communication choices or habits might help turn surface-level diversity into deeper intercultural friendships?

3. **"Generations and Friend Circles"**
   Adults under 30 are more likely to have diverse friend groups than older generations. What role do you think digital communication, pop culture, or shifting social norms play in that trend? How might younger generations be modeling new ways of building intercultural relationships?

Regardless of how diverse your social network is, we can also look at the quality of friendships based on the level of commitment and support you share. Take a few moments to read about the unique qualities of friendships, and as you do so, pause to reflect on your different friend connections and how they align with the characteristics below. As you come to understand the unique qualities of friendships, does it change or improve your view of your relationships?

Unique Qualities of Friendships

High vs. Low Obligation Friendships: High-obligation friends are those we feel deeply connected to, people we'd go out of our way to support, no matter the inconvenience. **Low-obligation** friends are still valued and cared for, but we might not stretch ourselves as far for them when they're in need. The level of obligation often reflects the depth of the relationship, shared history, and emotional closeness. In intercultural contexts, it can also involve different expectations around friendship, reciprocity, loyalty, and support. One college student, Luis, shared a simple rule his father taught him for telling the difference: "If they ask you to help them move, and you say yes without hesitation, they're important. If you suddenly remember you're busy that day, they're probably lower on the priority list." Luis's story reminds us that how we respond to others, especially in moments of need, can reveal the quiet truths of our relationships.

Before we dive into the next section, let's pause for a little heart-to-heart. We've just explored how friendships can look and feel different depending on their length, purpose, and the depth of connection. Maybe you were thinking about your own friendships—those that have lasted for years, and others that came and went but still left a mark.

Time Orientation: It is likely that you have some friendships that have lasted several years (**long-term friendships)** and other friendships that were brief by comparison (**short-term friendships)**. Some intercultural friendships flourish for a season, perhaps sparked by shared classes, community events, or professional collaborations. For example, Matt made several new friends while studying abroad in Taiwan. One of his short-term friendships was with a fellow exchange student from Brazil; they bonded over weekend trips and late-night study sessions, but lost touch after returning to their home countries. In contrast, Matt developed a long-term intercultural friendship with Aamir, a student from Pakistan whom he met during a Speech and Debate tournaments between his university and a neighboring college. Their close proximity in combination with their shared love of debating politics led to a lasting friendship.

Task-oriented vs. maintenance-oriented friendships: Friendships can be based on shared activities, hobbies, and projects such as work or a love of pickleball (**task-orientated**). Furthermore, friendships can be based on mutual liking and support (**maintenance-oriented**). In fact, you may find that many of your maintenance-oriented friendships emerged out of task-oriented friendships. Interracial and intercultural friendships may begin around shared tasks, such as work, activism, or hobbies, but deepen into maintenance-oriented bonds grounded in mutual respect and emotional support. Consider Wintillo and Fumio, two college students who met in a local university graduate program. Although from very different cultures, the two formed a lasting friendship through their work on a variety of research projects. Today, they remain close friends even though one lives in California and the other in Macau.

Low-disclosure vs. high-disclosure friendships: Perhaps you have a friend with whom you share your most personal thoughts and experiences (**high disclosure**), and another with whom you disclose only minimal information (**low disclosure**). In intercultural friendships, the level of self-disclosure is often shaped by trust, cultural norms, and emotional bandwidth. While cultural expectations vary, research consistently shows that high self-disclosure is a hallmark of deep friendship. However, it is equally important to recognize that certain topics may be considered taboo depending on cultural context. For instance, in the United States, it is generally impolite to ask a woman about her age or weight. In China, conversations about government and politics are best avoided, while in Saudi Arabia, criticizing religion, particularly Islam, is taboo. In contrast, in Nigeria, discussions about politics and religion are often welcomed and encouraged (Drew, 2024).

Now, let's shift gears a bit and talk about how our cultural backgrounds shape the way we understand and experience friendship. This part is especially close to my heart, because it reminds me of the many beautiful, sometimes challenging, but always meaningful relationships I've had with people from different cultures. Some of those friendships started with a shared project or a class, and others grew slowly over time, rooted in mutual respect and curiosity.

As we move forward, think about your own experiences. What does "friend" mean to you? How might that definition be different, or similar, for someone from another part of the world? Let's explore together how values like individualism and collectivism influence the way we connect, care, and communicate with one another.

Individualism and Collectivism in Intercultural Friendships

Across cultures, the meaning of friendship can vary in ways that reflect deeper values, particularly those of individualism and collectivism. In cultures that lean toward individualism like the United States, friendships are often seen as voluntary and spontaneous, shaped by personal goals and common interests. For example, someone might seek out a friend to practice a new language or learn how to cook a traditional dish. These connections, while genuine, often center around personal growth and exploration.

In contrast, collectivist cultures tend to view friendship as a long-term commitment, one that carries mutual responsibilities, and may even be handed down from generation to generation. A friend might be someone who helps with securing a visa or offers a place to stay during holidays. These relationships are often rooted in shared obligations and enduring support (Wahl & Scholl, 2014).

Even the word "friend" itself carries different weight across cultures. In the United States, it's a broad term that can encompass many types of relationships. But in places like Eastern Europe, "friend" is reserved for deeper, more intimate connections, what Americans might call a "close friend" (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Americans, shaped by individualistic norms, often form friendships quickly and may be perceived by others as informal or even superficial (Triandis, 1995). Meanwhile, collectivistic Asian cultures emphasize indirect communication, sincerity, and the nurturing of social harmony (Barnlund, 1989; Yum, 1988).

Friendship and Cultural Complexity

Building and sustaining intercultural friendships can be challenging, but it's important to remember that different cultures often value similar traits, like honesty and trustworthiness, even if they prioritize them differently (Barnlund, 1989). Researchers have identified many factors that influence these friendships, including personality, communication styles, cultural knowledge, and relational competence (Aberson, Shoemaker & Tomolillo, 2004; Collier & Mahoney, 1996; Gareis, 1995; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1979; McDermott, 1992; Olanrian, 1996; Yamaguchi & Wiseman, 2003; Zimmermann, 1995).

Within the United States, cultural identity also shapes how friendship is understood. Latinx Americans often value emotional support and affirming feedback. Asian Americans may prioritize intellectual exchange and guidance. African Americans tend to emphasize mutual respect and acceptance, while European Americans often focus on recognizing each other's individuality (Collier, 1996).

Relationship Initiation and Maintenance

Intercultural friendships may require more effort to initiate and maintain, but they hold the potential for deep and lasting connections. Prior experiences, like studying abroad or living in diverse communities, can spark a desire to form these relationships. Language barriers may slow the process, but with patience and openness, friends can build understanding through shared stories and self-disclosure. As trust grows, so does the depth of conversation, allowing friends to move beyond cultural differences and focus on what truly connects them (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Lee, 2006).

Interestingly, cultural differences can enrich friendships rather than hinder them. Some friends find joy in learning from each other's backgrounds, even creating playful hybrid languages like "Spanglish" or "Chinglish" that become part of their shared identity (Sias et al., 2008; Casmir, 1999; Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

Power, Perspective, and Mindfulness

It's important to recognize that not all intercultural friendships are balanced. Sometimes, individuals from dominant cultures may be more focused on sharing their own traditions than learning about others. This can reflect broader dynamics of power and privilege (Lee, 2006). For example, some European Americans in intercultural friendships expressed openness to cultural exchange but also downplayed its importance, suggesting they simply saw their friends as "people." As one researcher noted, this may reflect how those with more social power can overlook cultural norms or assume they can redefine them (Collier, 1996).

Ultimately, intercultural friendships remind us of the richness and complexity of human connection. They invite us to be mindful of how we communicate, to listen deeply, and to honor the diverse contexts in which relationships unfold.

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10.5.1: Dating and Love- When Cultures and Romance Collide

10.5.2: Intersectional Intimacy- Culture, Identity, and LGBTQ+ Relationships

10.5.3: Interracial Relationships

10.5.4: Home, Heritage, and History- Communication in Intercultural Families

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10.5.1: Dating and Love- When Cultures and Romance Collide



Figure 10.5.2.1: A wedding in Frankfurt, Germany

Romantic relationships, like friendships, reflect both cultural similarities and differences, and can blossom into incredibly rewarding experiences. However, it is important to recognize, when partners come from different backgrounds, they may also face unique challenges, such as differing expectations or unfamiliar communication styles. But every relationship is shaped by the individuals within it, and intercultural romantic partnerships are no exception.

Across cultures, romantic relationships are often voluntary and grounded in openness, mutual involvement, shared nonverbal understanding, and thoughtful reflection (Martin & Nakayama, 2025). These communicative practices help build trust and connection, especially when navigating cultural differences.

Finding a partner, whether from a similar or different background, is one of life's most fulfilling experiences. It's a chance to grow, to be seen, and to build something lasting. And when that relationship is nurtured with empathy and intentional communication, it becomes a source of strength, wonder, and love.

Cultural Close-Up

Romantic relationships, including marriage and cohabitation, also reflect shifting cultural dynamics in the U.S. The prevalence of intermarriage (marriage between spouses of different races or ethnicities) has been steadily increasing in the U.S. (Pew Research Institute, 2018)

- Overall Intermarriage Rate: In 2015, 17% of all U.S. newlyweds had a spouse of a different race or ethnicity. This marks a significant increase from 3% in 1967.
- Total Intermarried People: As of 2015, approximately 10% of all married people in the U.S. had a spouse of a different race or ethnicity, totaling about 11 million people.
- Most Common Intermarried Pairings (Among Newlyweds in 2015):
  - One Hispanic and one White spouse: 42% of all intermarried newlyweds.
  - One White and one Asian spouse: 15%.
  - One White and one Black spouse: 11.9% (based on a 2019 Pew analysis).
- Rates by Race/Ethnicity (Among Newlyweds in 2015):
  - Asian newlyweds were most likely to intermarry (29%).
  - Hispanic newlyweds followed (27%).

    - Black newlyweds (18%).
    - White newlyweds (11%).
- Cohabiting Relationships: Interracial and interethnic relationships are about as common among cohabitors as they are among newlyweds.

Discussion Questions

1. **“Talk the Talk: Navigating Intercultural Romance”**
   As intermarriage becomes more common in the U.S., couples often bring different cultural norms around expressing affection, resolving conflict, or communicating with extended family. What kinds of communication challenges might arise in intercultural romantic relationships, and what strategies could help partners bridge those differences?

2. **“From ‘Meeting the Parents’ to Making Decisions”**
   In intercultural or interracial relationships, how might communication styles differ when discussing major life decisions—like cohabitation, marriage, or family traditions? How can partners use intercultural communication skills (like perception checking or cultural empathy) to navigate these conversations with care?

3. **“Seen on Screen: What’s Missing?”**
   Think about how interracial or intercultural couples are portrayed in movies, TV shows, or social media. How are their communication styles shown—or overlooked? Do these portrayals reflect real-life challenges and strengths, or do they rely on stereotypes? How might more nuanced representations help viewers better understand intercultural communication?

10.5.2.1 Facilitating Factors in Romantic Intercultural Relationships: Interpersonal and Intercultural Attraction

Every day, people cross paths with countless others at school, work, or even while grabbing coffee. Yet only a few of these encounters leave a lasting impression. What makes someone stand out? What draws us to certain people and not others? It’s not magic, it’s a mix of factors that researchers have studied for years: physical attractiveness, similarity, complementarity, proximity, reciprocal liking, and resources (Aron et al., 2008). But first, what is considered an intercultural romantic relationship? An intercultural romantic relationship is defined as a "romantic union between two people who self-identify as belonging to different national, racial, ethnic, language, and/or religious backgrounds" (Yurtaeva & Charura, 2024, p. 1657). Research has found that whether our relationships are intercultural or not, some common factors bring us together. **Physical attractiveness** often catches our attention first. But it’s important to remember that “attractive” doesn’t always mean the most conventionally beautiful person in the room. In fact, when it comes to culture, there are often different standards for beauty and attractiveness. Often, we’re drawn to what feels familiar, features that remind us of home, comfort, or even ourselves. Studies show that people tend to form long-term romantic relationships with those they perceive as similar in physical attractiveness (Feingold, 1988; White, 1980). It’s not just about looks, it’s about resonance.

The French have a saying "*Qui se ressemble s’assemble*," which loosely translates to "Those who resemble each other, assemble." It turns out, science backs this up. We’re naturally drawn to people who seem similar to us, not just in appearance, but in personality, values, and preferences (Markey & Markey, 2007). Why? Because similarity reduces uncertainty. When someone feels familiar, we can relax. We feel seen, understood, and safe (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Then there’s the idea that “opposites attract.” It’s a romantic notion, and early research by sociologist Robert Winch suggested we seek out people who complement us, who fill in what we lack and help us feel complete. In fact, often couples in intercultural relationships share that their attraction was built on differences that each person found to be intriguing and curious. But more recent studies challenge this idea. Markey & Markey (2007) found that we’re actually more comfortable with people who are like us. In friendships and work relationships, we tend to prefer those who share our outlook and temperament (Ickes, 1999). It’s not that opposites can’t connect, it’s just that similarity often makes things easier.

Proximity is another quiet but powerful force. As you may recall from the chapter on nonverbal communication, proximity refers to the use of space and distance in communication. Simply being near someone, seeing them regularly, sharing space, can spark attraction by increasing opportunities for communication. It’s why classmates become close friends, and why coworkers sometimes fall in love. Familiarity breeds connection.

Reciprocal liking is perhaps the most heartwarming factor. We're drawn to people who like us back. It's affirming to know that someone sees us and chooses us. In fact, when people share their stories of falling in love, reciprocal liking is often the most cited reason (Riela et al., 2010).

Finally, we're attracted to resources, not just material ones, but emotional and intellectual qualities. A sense of humor, kindness, intelligence, and supportiveness all matter. According to Social Exchange Theory, we're drawn to people who offer meaningful benefits with minimal costs (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). In other words, we seek relationships that feel good and help us grow.

10.5.2.2 Individualism and Collectivism in Romantic Relationships

Individualism and collectivism play a role in romantic relationships as well. In individualistic cultures such as the United States, togetherness is important as long as it doesn't interfere too much with one's individual autonomy. Physical attraction, passion, and love are often initiators of romantic relationships in individualistic cultures. Being open, talking things out, and retaining a sense of self are maintenance strategies.

Collectivistic cultures often value acceptance and "fitting in" as the most important values for romantic partners. Family approval can make or break a romantic relationship. Family members are expected to align with and support the dominant values, beliefs, and behavioral expectations of the family hierarchy. Individual happiness is important, but is thought only to be fully realized only within the family system. When partners come from different cultural blueprints—say, one focused on family and the other on self—conflict is bound to happen. Understanding *how* intercultural couples negotiate these differences is key to their success.

Furthermore, individualism and collectivism can influence how people find romantic partners. In individualist cultures, romantic attraction often starts with private, one-on-one conversations based on personal interests and chemistry. In more collectivist cultures, relationships may begin in group settings, with family involvement playing a central role from the start. These contrasting scenes show how cultural values shape not just who we date—but how we communicate and connect (Eastwick, 2013).

Cultural Close-Up



Figure 10.5.2.1: The Shanghai Marriage Market

Shanghai Marriage Market

Courtship Practices in Chinese Culture: Tradition, Technology, and Family Expectations

In Chinese culture, romantic relationships are deeply influenced by family expectations, social norms, and evolving communication practices. While younger generations increasingly explore dating through apps and social media, traditional matchmaking remains a visible and respected part of the cultural landscape.

One enduring practice is the marriage market, where parents gather in public parks to exchange information about their adult children in hopes of arranging a suitable match. These markets are especially prominent in cities like Beijing, with well-known gatherings in Zhongshan Park, Yuyuantan Park, and the Temple of Heaven. Parents display handwritten profiles listing key attributes such as age, education, profession, income, and even property ownership. These details reflect cultural values around stability, filial piety, and social compatibility.

Communication in these settings is often indirect and pragmatic. While verbal exchanges may be polite and brief, nonverbal cues — such as posture, tone, and attentiveness — carry significant weight. The absence of the adult children themselves underscores the importance of intergenerational involvement in romantic decision-making, a contrast to more individualistic dating norms in Western cultures.

Historically, courtship in China involved handwritten love letters, poetic gestures, and family mediation. Today, digital platforms have transformed how people meet and interact, yet many families still prioritize marriage as a milestone of adulthood and a source of collective pride. This duality — between modern autonomy and traditional responsibility — creates a dynamic space for intercultural reflection.

Understanding these practices invites students to consider how cultural values shape relationship expectations, and how communication styles adapt across generations and contexts.

Discussion Questions

1. How do marriage markets reflect cultural values around family, responsibility, and social harmony?
2. What role do nonverbal communication and indirect messaging play in traditional matchmaking?
3. How might younger generations in China negotiate between modern dating preferences and traditional expectations?

These examples remind us that culture dictates *how* we meet partners. Now, let's explore the more universal, underlying factors—interpersonal and intercultural attraction—that draw people together, regardless of their cultural background.

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10.5.2: Intersectional Intimacy- Culture, Identity, and LGBTQ+ Relationships



Figure 9.2.1: Two women holding hands at a Pride Parade

10.5.3 Intersectional Intimacy: Culture, Identity, and LGBTQ+ Relationships

Research on intercultural relationships has historically focused more on heterosexual and cisgender couples, leaving a gap in understanding the unique dynamics of LGBTQ+ relationships across cultures. As Eguchi (2021) notes, “sexuality, sex, and gender are central to…cultural identities and orientations” (p. 276). Furthermore, while gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender relationships share many similarities with cisgender heterosexual ones, scholars such as Martin and Nakayama (2025) identify at least four areas of difference: the importance of close friendships, conflict management styles, expressions of intimacy, and the role of sexuality.

Close friendships often play a heightened role in LGBTQ+ communities, especially for individuals who face social stigma, family rejection, or systemic discrimination. These chosen families can serve as vital emotional and logistical support networks. In terms of conflict management, Gottman and Levenson (2004) found that gay and lesbian couples often demonstrate more positive conflict resolution strategies, such as humor and emotional validation, compared to their heterosexual counterparts.

Sexuality also plays a distinct role in relationship formation. While sexual attraction may initiate many gay relationships, these connections often evolve into enduring emotional bonds that persist beyond sexual involvement (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). This challenges heteronormative assumptions about relationship progression and highlights the fluidity of intimacy in LGBTQ+ contexts.

Cultural attitudes toward same-gender relationships vary widely across time and geography, shaped not only by social norms but also by language itself. Although homosexuality has existed throughout history, the ways cultures support, accept, or categorize same-gender attraction differ significantly. For example, the term *Two-Spirit*, a pre-contact pan-Indian identity, has been reclaimed by some Indigenous North Americans to describe gender-diverse individuals within their communities (Medicine, 2002; Enos, 2017). In some tribal cultures, gender is understood beyond binary categories, with at least four recognized genders: feminine woman, masculine woman, feminine man, and masculine man (Estrada, 2010). Language and cultural frameworks play a key role in shaping these understandings; for instance, many East and Southeast Asian languages, such as Chinese, lack grammatical gender and have historical traditions of gender fluidity and tolerance—though modern attitudes vary by region and political context. These linguistic structures not only reflect but also influence how gender and sexuality are perceived, offering insight into the cultural values embedded within everyday communication, such a self-disclosure.

Sharing your sexual orientation isn't just a personal choice, it's also a form of communication shaped by culture, relationships, and how safe someone feels. Around the world, people have very different attitudes toward same-sex relationships, and those attitudes can influence how open someone feels they can be. In LGBTQ+ relationships where partners come from different cultural backgrounds, decisions about what to share, when to share it, and with whom can be even more complex. What feels normal or safe in one culture might feel risky or misunderstood in another. A global study from the Pew Research Center shows that acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships has grown in many countries over the past decade (Poushter & Kent, 2020), but challenges still remain. Things like religion, politics, safety, economic development, and support from family or friends all play a role in whether someone feels comfortable being open. Even in places like the United States, where acceptance has increased, many LGBTQ+ people still face prejudice or pressure to hide parts of themselves—especially at work or with family. This can make it harder to meet potential partners or build strong relationships, since most connections grow through shared social spaces and honest conversations.

Legal and societal inequities also impact relationship stability. Gay and lesbian couples may encounter greater difficulty in jointly owning property, securing parental rights, or accessing relationship counseling, due to limited public funding and lingering legal disparities. These obstacles underscore the importance of inclusive policy and culturally competent support services.

Despite these challenges, LGBTQ+ relationships share many commonalities with heterosexual ones. Across orientations, people seek similar traits in partners—such as kindness, loyalty, and shared values—and report comparable levels of relational satisfaction (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Contrary to stereotypes, gay and lesbian couples do not replicate traditional gender roles; instead, they often divide household responsibilities more equitably than heterosexual couples.

It's important to note that not all LGBTQ+ relationships are intercultural, but many are. When partners come from different racial, ethnic, linguistic, or national backgrounds, their relationships reflect intersectional dynamics that intertwine identity, culture, and lived experience. These relationships offer rich opportunities for understanding how power, privilege, and cultural norms shape intimacy and connection.

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10.5.3: Interracial Relationships

While interracial relationships have occurred throughout history, there have been more historical taboos in the United States regarding relationships between African Americans and white people than other racial groups. Antimiscegenation laws were common in states and made it illegal for people of different racial/ethnic groups to marry. It wasn't until 1967 that the Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Loving versus Virginia*, declaring these laws to be unconstitutional (Pratt, 1995). It wasn't until 1998 and 2000, however, that South Carolina and Alabama removed such language from their state constitutions (Lovingday.org, 2011). The organization and website lovingday.org commemorates the landmark case and works to end racial prejudice through education.



Figure 9.2.2: The Supreme Court ruled in the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* case that states could not enforce laws banning interracial marriages.. Bahai.us – CC BY-NC 2.0.

Even after these changes, there were more Asian-white and Latinx-white relationships than there were African American–white relationships (Gaines Jr. & Brennan, 2011). Having already discussed the importance of similarity in attraction to mates, it's important to note that partners in an interracial relationship, although culturally different, tend to be similar in occupation and income. This can likely be explained by the situational influences on our relationship formation we discussed earlier—namely, that work tends to be a starting ground for many of our relationships, and we usually work with people who have similar backgrounds to us.

There has been much research on interracial couples that counters the popular notion that partners may be less satisfied in their relationships due to cultural differences. In fact, relational satisfaction isn't significantly different for interracial partners, although the challenges they may face in finding acceptance from other people could lead to stressors that are not as strong for intracultural partners (Gaines Jr. & Brennan, 2011). Although partners in interracial relationships certainly face challenges, there are positives. For example, some mention that they've experienced personal growth by learning about their partner's cultural background, which helps them gain alternative perspectives. Specifically, white people in interracial relationships have cited an awareness of and empathy for racism that still exists, which they may not have been aware of before (Gaines Jr. & Liu, 2000).

Cultural Close-Up

Love Is Blind and the Realities of Interracial Communication

In Season 6 of *Love Is Blind (2024)* , viewers were introduced to Kenneth Barnes and Brittany Mills, a couple whose emotional connection in the pods quickly blossomed into a romantic engagement. Kenneth, a Black man, and Brittany, a White woman, became one of the season's most talked-about interracial couples—not just for their chemistry, but for the deeper conversations their relationship sparked about race, culture, and communication.

While the show's format encourages emotional intimacy without physical appearance, Kenneth and Brittany's relationship revealed how cultural dynamics re-emerge once couples leave the pods. As they navigated life outside the experiment, subtle differences in communication styles, expectations, and racial awareness began to surface. Kenneth expressed frustration that Brittany didn't fully grasp the emotional weight of his experiences as a Black man, while Brittany struggled to articulate her support in ways that felt meaningful to him. Their conversations—sometimes tender, sometimes tense—highlighted the importance of *cultural empathy*, *mindful listening*, and *perception checking* in interracial relationships.

Their eventual breakup wasn't just about personal compatibility—it reflected how unresolved cultural misunderstandings can erode trust and connection. The couple's journey became a mirror for viewers, showing that love across racial lines requires more than attraction; it demands intentional communication, emotional labor, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths.

Discussion Questions

1. How might Kenneth and Brittany's communication challenges reflect broader issues faced by interracial couples in real life? What intercultural communication tools could have helped them navigate those moments more constructively?
2. If you were designing a reality show like *Love Is Blind*, how would you build in opportunities for participants to explore cultural identity and communication styles before making long-term commitments?

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10.5.4: Home, Heritage, and History- Communication in Intercultural Families



Figure 10.5.5.1: Four Generations of Family Life by Angela Nagao

Across the world, families are at the heart of life, shaped by culture and communication. Our family is often the first place where we learn about culture, and family life and culture are deeply intertwined. Each family carries its own unique cultural norms, traditions, and practices, creating what we might call "mini-family-cultures." As Johnson et al. (2013) remind us, "every family is both a unique microcosm and a product of a larger cultural context" (p. 632). These cultural foundations shape how families communicate in many important ways—how we learn language, express emotions, develop our identities, and manage conflicts. Communication shapes culture, and culture shapes communication, creating an equal and reciprocal relationship within families.

What makes a family intercultural? Take a look at Table 10.5.5.1 to explore the many different ways families can be categorized using an intercultural lens. In essence, families can be classified as intercultural when members of the family come from different cultural, ethnic, national, or religious backgrounds (Baldwin, 2017). Scholars estimate that more than 1 in 7 children in the United States are born to parents from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (Seider et al., 2023). As these families navigate differing traditions, values, and communication styles, intercultural competence becomes essential for fostering mutual understanding and emotional connection. The United States, with its long history of immigration and cultural blending, offers a compelling landscape for studying how intercultural families adapt, communicate, and thrive across generations.

Cultural Close-Up

Types of Intercultural Families

Families come in many different forms, and each one carries its own unique story. When we think about culture, ethnicity, and race, we open up a new way to understand how these elements shape the way families communicate and connect (Soliz & Minniear, 2023). Take a moment to explore the types of families below and reflect on the questions that follow.

Types of Families

Family Type	Description
Multinational Marriage	Parents are from different countries but share a similar ethnic or racial bac
Cross-National Family	Parents from the same culture or nation and children born in another coun
Third-Culture Family	Parents are from different ethnic or racial groups; children represent a thir
Interfaith Family	Parents come from different religious traditions, which shape cultural prac
Transracial Family	Parents and children are of different racial backgrounds, whether through a
Immigrant-Settler Family	One parent is an immigrant and the other is native-born, creating a blend (
Blended Intercultural Family	A remarriage or partnership brings together children from previous relatio
Multilingual Household	Parents speak different native languages and raise children in a multilingu
Diaspora Family	Parents share an ethnic heritage but were raised in different countries or c
Queer Intercultural Family	LGBTQ+ parents from different cultural backgrounds navigating both inter

Table 10.5.5.1 Types of Intercultural Families adapted from Soliz & Minniear, 2023.

Discussion Questions

1. How might children in cross-national birth families navigate their cultural identity differently from their parents? What communication challenges and opportunities might arise?
2. In third culture families, where children represent a blend of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, how can family members foster understanding and respect for each unique cultural influence?
3. What communication dynamics might adoptive intercultural families experience, and how can open dialogue support healthy family relationships across cultural differences?

These family types reveal that cultural mixing is everywhere. But what cultural values actually shape how these families operate day-to-day? We can use Hofstede's Dimensions of Cultural Variability to explore the deep connections between culture, family, and communication.

How are culture, family, and communication related?

Hofstede's Dimensions of Cultural Variability offer a valuable lens for understanding how culture shapes family life and interpersonal dynamics. One of the most influential dimensions—individualism versus collectivism—refers to the degree to which cultures emphasize personal autonomy and independence versus group cohesion and interdependence.

Individualism and Collectivism

These value orientations influence family roles, decision-making, caregiving practices, and conflict resolution. For example, in the United States, the traditional nuclear family—comprising parents and children—has long been the dominant model. However, shifting societal norms have led to more diverse family structures, including single-parent households, blended families, and chosen families.

In contrast, Thailand exemplifies a more collectivist approach. The Thai family, known as *Krob Krua*, includes not only parents and children but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others who share the same household or maintain close relational ties (Santiago Arias & Punyanunt-Carter, 2017). This extended family model reflects a cultural emphasis on shared responsibility, mutual support, and intergenerational caregiving.

These cultural values are evident from the earliest stages of life. In highly individualist cultures like the United States, often ranked among the most individualist on Hofstede's index, newborns are typically placed in separate bedrooms, reinforcing early independence. Parents often prepare a dedicated "baby room," and infants may sleep alone from the first night.

By contrast, co-sleeping is common in collectivist cultures, where physical closeness is seen as essential to bonding and security. For instance, in Finland, new parents are encouraged to use a "baby box" placed in the parents' bed, allowing the infant to sleep safely between them while maintaining proximity.

So now that we've looked at how individualism and collectivism shape family life, like who's in the household and how babies sleep, let's shift gears and talk about power. Specifically, how do families communicate authority, respect, and decision-making across generations? That's where Hofstede's concept of Power Distance comes in. Whether it's calling your grandma by her first name or using formal titles with your elders, power dynamics show up in everyday family communication in ways you might not even notice.

Power Distance

Hofstede's Power Distance dimension refers to the degree to which cultures accept and expect unequal distribution of power. In family life, this influences how authority is communicated, how decisions are made, and how respect is expressed across generations.

In high power distance cultures, family structures often reflect clear hierarchies. Elders or parents are viewed as primary decision-makers, and children are expected to show deference through both verbal and nonverbal communication. For example, in South Korea, it is common for younger family members to use honorific language and formal gestures when speaking to elders, reinforcing respect and hierarchy.

In contrast, low power distance cultures tend to promote egalitarian relationships within families. Children may be encouraged to express opinions openly, question decisions, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. In the Netherlands, for instance, family communication often emphasizes negotiation and shared decision-making, with parents and children engaging in dialogue as equals.

These differences are evident in everyday interactions—from how rules are explained to how affection is expressed. In high power distance families, communication may be more one-directional, with authority figures delivering instructions. In low power distance families, communication is often two-way, with emphasis on listening, validating, and co-creating meaning.

Understanding power distance helps us appreciate how cultural norms shape not just who speaks, but how, when, and to whom, revealing the deep connection between family roles and communication practices.

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10.6: Growing Your Intercultural Communication Skills for Successful Relationships

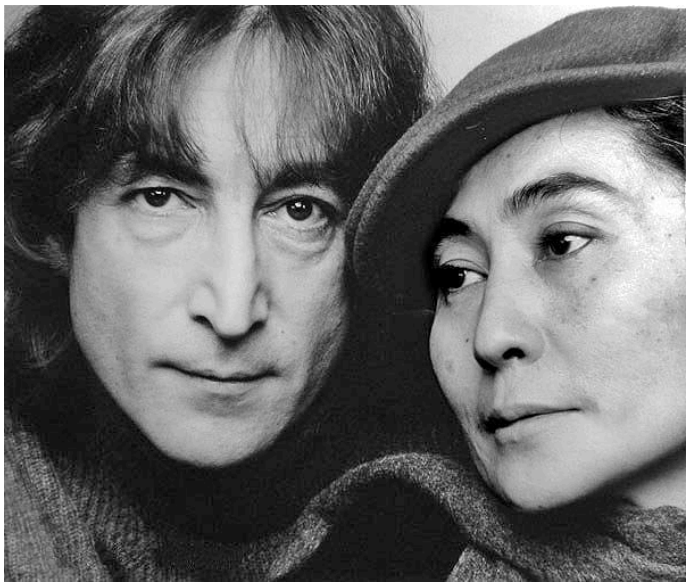


Figure: 10.6.1: John Lennon and Yoko Ono, circa late 1960s.

"We've got this gift of love, but love is like a precious plant. You can't just accept it and leave it in the cupboard or just think it's going to get on by itself. You've got to keep watering it. You've got to really look after it and nurture it."

John Lennon, 1969

John Lennon, best known as a founding member of the legendary British band *The Beatles,* and Yoko Ono formed a creative and romantic partnership that bridged British and Japanese cultures. Their collaboration influenced music, art, and activism from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, during a time when interracial relationships were still taboo. Their relationship reminds us that meaningful intercultural connection requires intention, empathy, and skill. Whether navigating new relationships, complex family hierarchies, or bridging communication gaps with friends, every intercultural relationship benefits from a set of core communication skills. These are the tools that help us build empathy, manage uncertainty, and embrace cultural differences. The communication tools below are a great resource for all relationships, whether intercultural or not.

- **Practice Kindness**: Kindness represents a choice to interact and treat others with dignity and generosity. It is grounded in our daily communication, fostered by daily communication behaviors that build connection, such as words of affirmation, gestures of support, and relationship investments like small acts of service.
  - Skill in Practice: *"I formed a close friendship with an international student. When she was feeling homesick, I brought her favorite snack from back home and asked about her family—it helped her feel seen and supported."*
- **Relational Respect**: Respect is essential for building trust and connection in relationships. To communicate with respect means to acknowledge someone's inherent value, to treat them with fairness, and to honor their dignity. In relationships, to respect an individual, we must show respect for their personal beliefs and values, even if we do not agree with those beliefs.
  - Skill in Practice: *"My roommate and I have different religious views, but I still make space for her traditions."*
- **Mindfulness**: Mindfulness means being aware of your communication in the moment and is essential for intercultural relationships because it asks us to be aware of our own cultural assumptions and biases, as well of those of the other person we are communicating with.
  - Skill in Practice: *"Before jumping to conclusions, I asked myself—am I reacting based on my own cultural lens?"*
- **Mindful Listening**: Mindful listening is a key process for successful relationships, involving fully paying attention to the sender, paying attention to subtle verbal and nonverbal messages, and attempting to understand the other person. In tense situations, whenever possible, try to listen first, and invite the other person to speak first.
  - Skill in Practice: "During a debate over international politics, I let my friend speak first to really understand her position."

- **Openness to new Information**: As we have learned in this book, no one member of a culture knows everything about their own culture, and it is impossible to know everything about other cultures. But, we can adapt an open-minded approach to be willing to learn new information, change our opinions, and update our attitudes.
    - Skill in Practice: *"I used to think that arranged marriages were an outdated construct, but listening to my Sociology professor, I learned that they are still practiced in about 50% of the world's population."*
- **Intercultural Empathy**: Intercultural empathy is the ability to creatively attempt to understand the feelings and experiences of someone from a different cultural background.
    - Skill in Practice: "*When my friend shared how hard it was to come out in her culture, I listened with my heart, not just my ears."*
- **Intercultural Communication Competence**: The effective and appropriate use of verbal and nonverbal communication skills to bridge cultural differences. For example, to communicate effectively, it is important to adapt and use terminology that respects the identities of the people we interact with.
    - Skill in Practice: *"I started using my classmate's chosen name and pronouns—it made our conversations feel more respectful and real."*
- **Behavioral Flexibility**: Behavioral flexibility means adjusting your communication style when needed, while staying true to your values. It's about learning how to respond thoughtfully to cultural differences.

    - Skill in Practice: "When I began dating someone from a traditional Indian family, I learned to greet family members from oldest to youngest as a sign of respect."

By actively practicing these skills, we equip ourselves to navigate the wonderful complexities of any intercultural connection.

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10.7: Conclusion

The quality of our personal relationships is one of the most important factors for a happy life. In this chapter, you learned about different types of relationships, including friendship, family, romantic, inter-racial, and LGBTQ+. For each type of relationship, you learned unique features of the relationship and the benefits of intercultural relationships. In addition, we learned how intercultural relationships have both costs and rewards. Last, in the intercultural tool-kit, you learned a variety of communication tips for establishing, building, maintaining, and repairing intercultural relationships. In many ways, relationships are like a savings account in that they take careful planning and investments over time for a rich reward.

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