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The Influence of Socio-cultural Domains on Communication

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Abstract

The way we use language is directly related to our cultural backgrounds. Culture refers to learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviour common to a particular group of people. Culture may also include common artifacts, music, customs, food, language, dress, and celebrations. Your cultural background includes your ethnicity, age, nationality, gender, family structure, spirituality, and sexual orientation. Each of these individually influences the way you use language. Certain words, phrases, and nonverbal elements are connected to certain aspects of your culture background.

Specialized languages develop within groups that share a common element. In similar ways, people who share common cultural experiences also develop particular terminologies. In fact these language systems are even more significant given that they also include specific rules and how and when to use such terms. In addition, they are largely multigenerational – passed on from generation to generation. Culture is a powerful force that affects every aspect of our lives. Culture is synonymous with ‘the ways of a people’.

Introduction

There is indeed a cultural dimension to human communication. When people from different backgrounds interact, they face a set of challenges different from those that arise when members of the same culture communicate. We all communicate based on the ways in which we have been socialized to think about self, and society. You communicate to others in different ways – verbally, nonverbally, or through artifacts like food, music, jewelry, clothes, or arts. You may do many of these things with little thoughts to how they reflect the cultures in which you were raised. Trenholm and Jensen o0pine:

Sometimes it’s easy to see cultural differences. If you’ve ever travelled to another country, you realize that what they do is often not what you do at home. People dress, move, and speak differently. They listen to different music, live in different kinds of shelters, and eat different food. If these were the only differences to separate us, cross-cultural communication might not be so difficult. But there are other, more subtle differences that you can’t see from the windows of a tour bus, differences in the ways people within cultures view the world and their places in it. These differences make up a culture’s **worldview**, its orientation toward such things as God, humans, nature, the universe, and the other philosophical issues that are concerned with the concept of being (374).

Fundamental Concepts

Culture and Co-culture

Culture is ‘the language, values, beliefs, traditions, and customs people share and learn’. When you identify yourself as a member of a culture, you must not only share certain characteristics, but you must also recognize

yourself and others like you as possessing these features and see others who don't possess them as members of different categories. For example, skin colour is a significant factor in distinguishing members of a culture. Cultural membership contributes to every person's **social identity** – the part of the self concept that is based on membership in groups.

A co-culture is a group of people who are bonded through a system of values, beliefs and behaviour associated with a common group identity. It is membership in a group that is part of an encompassing culture. Membership in a co-culture can be a source of enrichment and pride, but when the group is stigmatized by others, being connected with a co-culture isn't so fulfilling. For instance, members of a co-culture may be disadvantaged in employment interviews where the rules are established by the dominant culture. In some cases, co-cultures voluntarily embrace the chance to distinguish themselves from society at large – such as teens creating slang that is understood only by members of their in-groups, **gays** bonding together for solidarity, recognition and acceptance. Gangs fit the definition of co-culture. They reflect their membership through clothing, tattoos and hand signals.

Many of the communication challenges that arise between members of different cultures also operate when people from different co-cultures communicate. Group membership is marked by language behaviour.

Intercultural Communication

This occurs when members of two or more cultures or co-cultures exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems, both verbal and non verbal. Whenever two people communicate, both similarities and differences exist.

Homophily is the term used to describe the overlap of common cultural experiences. All of us belong to many groups – ethnic, gender, socio-economic status, age, abilities, regional/national origin, sexual orientation and spirituality, so our communications are intercultural or at least co-cultural. Many people share a basically common background. Even when people with different cultural backgrounds communicate, those differences may not be important.

Intercultural communication doesn't always occur when people from different cultures interact. The cultural backgrounds, perceptions, and symbol systems of the participants must have a

significant impact on the exchange before we can say that culture has made a difference. In order to view ourselves as members of a culture, there has to be some distinction between 'us' and 'them'.

Cultural Difference as Generalizations

Cultural influences on communication are obvious. Different languages or customs can make communication between groups both interesting and challenging. There are subtle yet vitally important values and norms that shape the way members of a culture communicate. Unless communicators are aware of these differences, they may see people from other cultures as unusual or even offensive without realizing that their apparently odd behaviour comes from following a different set of beliefs and unwritten rules about the 'proper' way to communicate.

High versus Low Context

There are two distinct ways that members of various cultures deliver messages. A **low-context culture** uses language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as directly as possible. To low-context communicators, the meaning of a statement lies in the words spoken. By contrast, a **high-context culture** relies heavily on subtle, often nonverbal cues to maintain social harmony. Rather than upsetting others by speaking directly communicators in these societies learn to discover meaning from the context in which a message is delivered: the nonverbal behaviour of the speaker, the history of the relationship, and the general social rules that govern interaction between people. In societies where maintaining harmony is important, communicators avoid speaking directly if that threatens another person's 'face' or dignity. They are less likely to offer a clear 'no' to an undesirable request. Instead, they would probably use roundabout expressions like 'I agree with you in principle, but ---' or 'I sympathize with you ...' or 'we'll give your request careful thought.'

To members of high context cultures, communicators with a low-context style can appear overtly talkative, lacking in subtlety, and redundant. On the other hand, to people from low-context backgrounds, high-context communicators often seen inexpressive, or even dishonest.

High-Context and Low-Context Communication Style

Low-Context

Majority of information carried in explicit verbal messages with less focus on the situational context

Self-expression valued. Communicators state opinions and desire directly and strive to persuade others to accept their own view point

Clear, eloquent speech considered praiseworthy. Verbal fluency admired

High-Context

Important information carried in contextual cues such as time, place, relationship, situation. Less reliance on explicit verbal messages.

Relational harmony valued and maintained by indirect expression of option, communicators abstain from saying 'no' directly.

Communicators talk 'around' the point allowing the others to fill in the missing pieces. Ambiguity and use of silence admired.

Individual versus Collectivism

Some cultures value the individual, while others place greater emphasis on the group. Members of an **individualistic culture** view their primary responsibility as helping themselves, whereas communicators in **collectivistic cultures** feel loyalties and obligations to an in-group: one's extended family, community, or even the organization one works for. Individualistic cultures are also characterized by self-reliance and competition, whereas members of a collectivistic culture are more attentive to and concerned with the opinions of significant others.

Members of individualistic cultures tend to view themselves in terms of what they do, while people in collectivistic cultures are more likely to define themselves in terms of group membership.

The difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures also shows up in the level of comfort or anxiety their respective members feel when communicating. In societies where the need to conform is greater, there is a higher degree of communication apprehension. For example, as a group, residents of China, Korea, and Japan exhibit a significantly higher degree of

anxiety about speaking out in public than do members of individualistic cultures such as the United States and Australia. Different levels of communication apprehension don't mean that shyness is a 'problem' in some cultures. In fact, just the opposite is true: In these societies reticence is valued. When the goal is to avoid being 'the nail that sticks out', it's logical to feel nervous when you make yourself appear different by calling attention your way.

The Self in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Individualistic Cultures

Self is separate, unique individual; should be independent, self-sufficient.

Individual should take care of himself or herself and immediate family.

Many flexible group memberships; friendships based on shared interests and activities.

Reward for individual achievement and initiative; individual decision encouraged; individual credit and blame assigned

High value on autonomy, change, youth, individual security, quality.

Collectivistic Cultures

People belong to extended families or in-groups; 'we' or group orientation

Person should take care of extended family before self.

Emphasis on belonging to a very few permanent in-groups, which have a strong influence over the person

Reward for contribution to group goals and well-being, cooperation with in-group members; group decision valued, credit and blame shared.

High value on duty, order, tradition, age, group, security, status and hierarchy.

Power Distance

Not all cultures accept the U.S. Declaration of Independence that 'all men (and women) are created equal'. Some operate on the assumption that certain groups of people-an aristocracy or an economic class and some institutions such as the church or the government have the right to control the lives of individuals.

Hofstede coined the term ‘power distance’ to describe the degree to which members of a society accept an unequal distribution of power (46)

Cultures with low power difference believe in minimizing the difference between various social classes. Rich and poor, educated and uneducated groups may still exist, but there is a pervasive belief in low power difference cultures that one person is as good as another regardless of his or her status in life. Low power difference cultures support the notion that challenging authority is acceptable – even desirable. Members aren’t necessarily punished for raising questions about the status quo.

Children who are raised in cultures with high power difference are expected to obey their parents and other authority figures to a degree that would astonish most children raised in the United States or Canada.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The desire to resolve uncertainty seems to be a trait shared by people around the world. While uncertainty may be universal, cultures have different ways of coping with an unpredictable future. Hofstede uses the term **uncertainty avoidance** to reflect the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous situations and how much they try to avoid them (78).

A culture’s degree of uncertainty avoidance is reflected in the way its members communicate. In countries that avoid uncertainty, deviant people and ideas are considered dangerous, and intolerance is high. People in these cultures are especially concerned with security, so they have a strong need for clearly defined rules and regulations. By contrast, people in a culture that is less threatened by the new and unexpected are more likely to tolerate – or even welcome people who don’t fit the norm. Following established rules and patterns isn’t necessarily expected, and different behaviour might even be welcomed. This difference shows up in the acceptability of new products and ideas: innovation is high in countries that are low on uncertainty avoidance, and imitation is high in countries that are high on uncertainty avoidance.

Achievement versus Nurturing

The term **achievement culture** describes societies that place a high value on material success and a focus on the task at hand, while **nurturing culture** is a descriptive term for cultures that regard the support of relationships as an especially important goal. Hofstede refers to the first group as ‘masculine’

and the second as 'feminine' based on the stereotypical focus of each sex. 'Hard' and 'soft' are also used.

The portrait of an effective communicator varies from one type of culture to another. Most notably, achievement-oriented societies prescribe different roles for women and men. In these cultures, male virtues include assertiveness, independence, and individuality. A woman who exhibits these traits may be viewed unfavourably for 'acting like a man'. By contrast, in nurturing societies, there is little difference between the expected behaviour for men and women: The ideal profile for both sexes is one of cooperation and of holding the belief that personal relationships are at least as important as material achievement.

In today's increasingly multicultural societies, people from different cultural backgrounds are likely to encounter one another 'at home', in the country they share.

Codes and Culture

Challenges arise when two or more people try to communicate with one another. These challenges become even greater when the communicators use different verbal and non verbal communication systems.

Verbal Codes

Although there are remarkable similarities between the word's many languages, they also differ in important respects that affect the way their speakers communicate with one another and with speakers of other tongues. Example:

a. Language and Identity

If you live in a culture where everyone speaks the same tongue, then language will have little noticeable impact on how you view yourself and others. But when some members of a society speak the dominant language and others speak a minority one, or when that second language is not prestigious, the sense of being a member of an out-group is strong. At this point the speaker of a non-dominant language can react in one of two ways: either feel pressured to assimilate by speaking the 'better' language, or refuse to accommodate the minority language and maintain loyalty to the ethnic tongue. This problem can be acute in countries like the United States, where many students are children of immigrant parents. Even within a language

system, the label that members of a co-culture use to define themselves can both reflect and help define their sense of identity. African American communicators who identified themselves as 'black' generally were oriented toward the goals of unity and acceptability, while those who preferred 'African America' tended to focus more on their blended heritage.

b. **Verbal Communication Styles**

Each language has its own unique style that distinguishes it from others. One of the cultural differences is **directness** or **indirectness**. Low-context cultures use language primarily to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas as clearly, directly, and logically as possible, while high-context cultures may speak less directly, using language to maintain social harmony.

Another way in which language styles can vary across cultures is in terms of whether they are **elaborate or succinct**. Succinctness is most extreme in cultures where silence is valued.

A third way that languages differ from one culture to another involves **formality and informality**. Openness and informality characterizes U.S. culture.

According to Faul, as quoted in Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor, states:

Visitors may be overwhelmed by the sheer exuberant friendliness of Americans, especially in the central and southern parts of the country. Sit next to an American on an Airplane and he will immediately address you by your first name, ask 'so-how do you like it in the States?', explain his recent divorce in intimate detail, invite you home for dinner, offer to lend you money, and wrap you in a warm hug on parting. This does not necessarily mean he will remember your name the next day. Americans are friendly because they just can't help it; they like to be neighbourly and want to be liked (3-4).

The informed approach that characterizes communication in countries like the United States is quite different from the great concern for propriety in many parts of Africa.

2. Nonverbal Codes

Many elements of nonverbal communication are shared by all humans, regardless of culture. Some of these physical displays – facial expressions and gestures have the same meaning everywhere. Crying is a universal sign of unhappiness or pain, and smiles signal friendly intentions.

Despite nonverbal similarities, the range of differences in nonverbal behaviour is tremendous. The meaning of some gestures varies from one culture to another, for example, the gesture made by joining thumb and forefinger to form a circle. This gesture is a cheery affirmation to most Americans, but it has very different meanings in other parts of the world. In France and Belgium it means ‘you’re worth zero,’ in Japan it means ‘money’, and in Greece and Turkey it is an insulting or vulgar sexual invitation. Given this sort of cross-cultural ambiguity, it’s easy to visualize how an innocent tourist could wind up in serious trouble without understanding why.

When people of different races or ethnicities interact, they sometimes use the space around them in ways that may reflect their attitudes. Like distance, patterns of eye contact vary around the world. For example, direct and strong eye contact connotes disrespect in one culture, whereas averting eye contact is a sign of respect in another.

3. Decoding Messages

Given all the differences in verbal and nonverbal communication systems, it’s easy to see how decoding is an especially big challenges for communicators from different cultural backgrounds.

Translation: Anyone who has tried to translate ideas from one language to another knows that the potential for misunderstanding is always present. Even choosing the right words during translation won’t guarantee that non-native speakers will use an unfamiliar language correctly.

Attribution Variations: Attribution is the process of making sense of another person’s behaviour. Attribution is an unavoidable part of communicating: We have to form some sort of interpretation of what others’ words and actions mean. But most behaviour are so ambiguous that they can be interpreted in several ways. Furthermore, the usual tendency is to stick to the first attribution one makes. It’s easy to see how this quick, sloppy

attribution process can lead to making faulty interpretations – especially when communicators are from different cultural backgrounds.

Culturally based attributions don't just occur between members of different nationalities. Even different uses of dialects or accents by native born members of the same country can affect a listener's evaluation of a speaker. Most cultures have a 'standard dialect' which is spoken by high-status opinion leaders who are judged as being competent, intelligent, and confident. By contrast, nonstandard speakers are likely to be rated less favourably.

Patterns of Thought: The way members of a culture are taught to think and reason shapes the way they interpret others' messages. Members of individualistic cultures prize rationality and linear, logical thinking. They value the ability to be impartial – to analyze a situation from a detached perspective. They rely on facts, figures and experts to make a decision. In contrast, members of collectivistic societies are more likely to be intuitive. They accept the fact that people, things or ideas can be both right and wrong, good or bad at the same time.

These differing ways of thinking don't mean that members of individualistic cultures are never intuitive or that collectivists are never rational. The differences in their ways of thinking are a matter of degree.

Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

a. Motivation an Attitude

The desire to communicate successfully with strangers is an important start. People high in willingness to communicate with people from other cultures have a greater number of friends from different backgrounds than those who are less willing to reach out.

b. Tolerance and Ambiguity

When we encounter communicators from different cultures, the level of uncertainty is especially high. When communicating in an unfamiliar language, ambiguity may arise from a lack of fluency. Pico Iyer, as quoted in Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor states:

I was also beginning to realize how treacherous it was to venture into a foreign language if one could not measure the shadows of the

words one used --- and I began to think her unusually sensitive or else prone to bold and violent extremes, when really she was reflecting nothing but the paucity of her English vocabulary --- Talking in a language not one's own was like walking on one leg; when two people did it together, it was like a three-legged waltz. (129-130).

Without tolerance for ambiguity, the mass of often confusing and sometimes downright incomprehensible messages that bombard intercultural sojourners would be impossible to manage.

c. **Open-Mindedness**

A communicator should have an open-minded attitude when interacting with people from different backgrounds. He should avoid **ethnocentrism**. This is an attitude that one's own culture is superior to others. An ethnocentric person thinks – either privately or openly – that anyone who does not belong to his or her in-group is somehow strange, wrong, even inferior.

Travel writer, Rick Steves as quoted in Adler, Rosenfeld & Proctor writes:

... we (Americans) consider ourselves very clean and commonly criticize other cultures as dirty... Many cultures spit in public and blow their nose right onto the street. They couldn't imagine doing that into a small cloth, called a hanky, and storing that in their pocket to be used again and again...

Too often we think of the world in terms of a pyramid of 'civilized' (us) on the top and 'primitive' groups on the bottom. (9)

Ethnocentrism leads to an attitude of **prejudice** – an unfairly biased and intolerant attitude towards others who belong to an out-group. Stereotypical prejudices include the obvious exaggerations that all women are emotional, all men are sex-crazed, all older people are out of touch with reality and all immigrants are welfare parasites.

Open-minded communicators can overcome pre-existing stereotypes and learn to appreciate people from different backgrounds as individuals.

d. **Knowledge and Skill**

Attitude alone isn't enough to guarantee success in intercultural encounters. Communicators need to possess enough knowledge of other cultures to know what approaches are appropriate. If, for example, you understand that a potential friend's background is likely to make displays of respect especially important, you could adjust your communication accordingly. Knowledge of how to communicate with people from different backgrounds is usually culture specific.

Passive Observation is one of the strategies for a more mindful, competent style of intercultural communication. It involves noticing what behaviour members of a different culture use and applying these insights to communicate in ways that are most effective. Another is **Active strategies** which includes reading, watching films and asking members of the other culture how to behave, as well as taking academic courses related to intercultural communication and diversity. The third strategy, **self disclosure**, involves volunteering personal information to people from the other culture with whom you want to communicate. One type of self – disclosure is to confess your cultural ignorance. This is very new to me. What's the right thing to do in this situation?

Conclusion

Intercultural communication occurs when members of two or more cultures or co-cultures exchange messages in a manner that is influenced by their different cultural perceptions and symbol systems. In other words, intercultural communication requires the perception of differences, not just their existence.

A number of fundamental values shape communication. When members of different cultures interact, these values can affect interaction in ways that may be felt but not understood. These values include an emphasis on high – or low – context communication, individualism or collectivism, high or low power distance, relatively more or less avoidance of uncertainty, and either achievement or nurturing.

The codes that are used by members of a culture are often the most recognizable factors that shape communication between people from different backgrounds. Verbal codes include language spoken and the worldwide created by it, as well as verbal communication style. Nonverbal

codes also differ significantly, as do the attributions that cultural conditioning generate.

Intercultural communicative competence involves four dimensions: motivation and attitude, tolerance for ambiguity, open-mindedness, and knowledge and skill. Whereas motivation, attitude, tolerance, and open-mindedness are culture-general, knowledge and skill are usually culture – specific, requiring the active acquisition of information and training to reduce uncertainty about another culture.

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