

Breaking the Ice

A Guide to Understanding People
from Other Cultures

Daisy Kabagarama

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A Guide to Understanding
People from Other Cultures

Daisy Kabagarama

McPherson College

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*To my fellow world citizens who dream of a peaceful world;
a world of hope, joy, and tranquility;
a world of harmony, justice, and truth;
a world that was intended to be.*



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Preface

This book was born of a burning desire to write about a topic that would facilitate understanding among people who are from different parts of the world, with diverse cultural backgrounds. From the time I was young, I have been told that I get along well with people who are different from me. I enjoy knowing people, especially those who are different from me because I can learn a lot from them, thereby enriching my life. An encounter with a stranger gives me joy, fulfillment, and rejuvenation that I cannot obtain even if I were to read a different novel every day.

This book came out of a need to provide some guidelines to cross-cultural understanding. Although it is intended primarily for a U.S. audience, the model it provides will be helpful to anyone preparing for cross-cultural encounters. A person going out of the United States to another country will benefit from it and so will a person coming into the United States or visiting another foreign culture. The concept of culture is discussed fully, stressing both its unifying and divisive elements. In its unifying form, culture provides identity, but it can also create barriers between people especially if they feel that their way of going about life is the best. There are many ways of doing things and proponents of the various ways think and believe that theirs are the best. Fortunately or unfortunately, that's how the world operates. Does this mean that cross-cultural understanding is impossible unless we all belong to one large, all-embracing culture? Far from it! The discussion in this book shows that it is possible to attempt an understanding of others, without necessarily giving up what we call our own. Once a common denominator is found, there is no need to discuss whose ways are better. Instead, there is a need to recognize that people can learn from each other and make the world a better place. Empathy, rather than sympathy, should be the catch word as we attempt to relate to others.

Besides enjoying the subject that I am writing about, I feel that today we, people of planet Earth, need each other much more than ever before. Our mission is to save our planet and live in harmony. If this book can be of benefit to anyone attempting to understand other cultures, then my goal will be accomplished. It will also be a big tribute to my parents, teachers, and all people who equipped me with knowledge at every stage of my development. Finally, as an educator, I feel that my students not only need knowledge in their specialty areas, they need to communicate this knowledge effectively to various audiences in order for it to be meaningful.

Why, for example, study chemistry if one cannot effectively tell an audience how to use various chemicals responsibly? Or why study geography and history if one cannot link the environment and the past to people's current ways of life? Why develop complicated mathematical models, computer programs, and sophisticated technology, yet fail to adapt these tools to all the people who need them? Why would those who study biological and natural sciences recognize, appreciate, and

take interest in understanding differences in nature, yet fail to do the same with human cultural variety? Finally, using examples from the social sciences in which I claim expertise, why should a student learn about culture and fail to appreciate differences among people and communicate the same message to others? Therefore, if this book can bridge the gap between knowledge acquisition, transmission, and application, I will have accomplished my mission.

Chapter 1 presents a brief summary of the world events that compel us to think and act as members of one global community. Chapter 2 examines, in detail, the concept of culture. The pervasive nature of culture tends to downplay its role in shaping human behavior. The discussion is aimed at showing that culture does indeed mold human behavior to a great extent and that its role is major.

The communication process is discussed in Chapter 3. The main point is that communication is a difficult process, requiring special skills in order to succeed. This process becomes even more difficult when we are dealing with those whose cultures and languages are different from our own.

Chapter 4 discusses a seven-step process for handling cross-cultural encounters. This section draws ideas from all the other parts and offers a guide toward successfully handling unfamiliar relationships. Examples cited in this book about behavior in different cultures come from the following sources: my own personal experience as a Ugandan-born woman now living in the United States; stories collected in interviews with people from other cultures; and documented studies by other scholars. Exercises are presented both within and at the end of each chapter. They are aimed at helping readers discover their own biases. It is my hope that self-discovery leads to recognizing new ideas and courses of action. Exercises to accompany each of the seven steps are presented separately in Chapter 5. The poem below illustrates the nature of the world (Kabagarama, 1992):

One World

It's one world
 My friend, it's one world
 Our barriers
 Our fears
 Have put us apart
 While we don't have to part
 It's one world
 My friend, it's one world
 Look at the valleys
 And look at the hills
 Picture the creatures
 And picture the seas
 It's one world
 My friend, it's one world

Listen to the birds
 And listen to their cries
 Visit the animals
 Listen to their songs
 It's one world
 My friend, it's one world
 When all
 In all
 We stumble
 And fall
 We see
 That strife
 And faith
 Are part of one world.

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When the work is done and tough tasks are accomplished, we look back and ask, "How did I do it?" Yes, this is the question that flashed through my mind as I completed this book. It is difficult to acknowledge all the people in my life who have had an impact on me. I will, nonetheless, single out those people who were a pillar for me to lean on during the course of this project.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii

Introduction	1
<i>Need for Global Education</i>	2

1	A Changing World	4
	<i>Population</i>	4
	<i>Business</i>	5
	<i>Technology</i>	5
	<i>Immigration</i>	7
	<i>The U.S. Cultural Mix</i>	10
	<i>Lifestyle</i>	11
	<i>Changing Work Relations and the Role of Women</i>	11
	<i>Discussion Topics</i>	12
	<i>Exercises</i>	13
	<i>Endnotes</i>	13
2	Culture: The Molder of Human Behavior	14
	<i>Components of Culture</i>	15
	Exercise	19
	<i>Functions of Culture</i>	19
	Exercise	22
	<i>Characteristics of Culture</i>	22
	<i>Culture Acquisition</i>	23
	Exercise	24
	<i>Agents of Culture</i>	24
	<i>Discussion Topics</i>	25
	<i>Exercises</i>	26
	<i>Endnotes</i>	26
3	Communication: The Heartbeat of Human Interaction	28
	<i>Ingredients of Communication</i>	32
	<i>Individual Traits</i>	32
	<i>Geocultural Factors</i>	33
	<i>The Role of Verbal Communication</i>	34
	<i>Nonverbal Communication</i>	35

	<i>The Role of Silence in Communication</i>	36
	<i>An Assessment</i>	37
	<i>Discussion Topics</i>	37
	<i>Exercises</i>	37
	<i>Endnotes</i>	38
4	The Seven-Step Process (T.S.S.P.) of Cross-Cultural Understanding	40
	<i>Getting Acquainted</i>	40
	Genuine Interest	43
	A Sense of Curiosity and Appreciation	43
	Empathy	44
	Nonjudgementality	44
	Exercise	45
	Flexibility	45
	Child-Like Learning Mode	45
	Exercise	46
	<i>Asking the Right Questions</i>	46
	General Questions First and Specific Ones Later	46
	Sensitive Questions	47
	Questions of Interest	47
	Relaxed Manner	48
	Exercise	48
	<i>Handling Visual Images</i>	48
	Value Neutrality	49
	Appreciate Inner Beauty	49
	Respect Diversity	50
	Tolerate Differences	50
	Exercise	50
	<i>Dealing with Stereotypes</i>	50
	Sincere Self-Examination	51
	Search for Knowledge	51
	Practicing Objectivity	52
	Exercise	52
	<i>Getting Started</i>	52
	Positive Outlook	53
	Freedom from Procrastination	53
	Learning from Mistakes	53
	Introspective Interaction	54
	Exercise	54
	<i>Gaining Entry</i>	54
	Genuine Interest	54

	Good Listening Skills	55
	Boundless Generosity	56
	Ability to Give Compliments	56
	Exercise	57
	<i>Establishing Trust and Cooperation</i>	57
	Availability Whenever Needed	57
	Ability to Give and Accept Criticism	58
	Ability to Be Spontaneous	59
	Exercise	59
	<i>Endnotes</i>	59
5	Exercises	60
	<i>Getting Acquainted</i>	60
	<i>Asking the Right Questions</i>	61
	<i>Handling Visual Images</i>	62
	<i>Dealing with Stereotypes</i>	62
	<i>Getting Started</i>	63
	<i>Gaining Entry</i>	63
	<i>Establishing Trust and Cooperation</i>	64
	Bibliography	65

Introduction

The world is changing from one characterized by a few major economic and political actors to one with several power centers. Judging from recent political and economic events both within and among countries, the pace of change is very fast and it may be much faster toward the end of this century. These changes will undoubtedly alter people's beliefs, behavior, and modes of interaction.

The cold war between the West and the East is giving way to new peace resolutions. At the same time, East European countries that are making great strides toward free market economies are likely to be major economic players. The newly-emerging industrial nations of Asia such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan are gradually shifting the economic strength from the Atlantic axis to the Pacific. The commonly known Third World countries of sub-saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America are also increasingly becoming key players in international political and economic affairs. The oil-rich Middle East countries are seeking ways to resolve their differences and attain a common voice.

Although English has been and still is the main world lingua franca, it is being challenged by Chinese, Arabic, German, Spanish, and French. Other languages such as Swahili, Hausa, and Japanese are making their way to international business meetings and college campuses. The unique feature distinguishing these changes is diversity. Social organizations are becoming more diverse and increasingly inter-dependent. Technology has facilitated the fast flow of information between peoples of different cultures. As a result, the world is shrinking, both in terms of geographical, psychological, and sociological distance. No longer can we sit comfortably in our small corners of the world and watch the days go by, hoping that we will not be bothered. Catastrophes such as AIDS, world hunger, environmental degradation, conflicts of all sorts, and the possibility of a nuclear disaster all pose a threat to our existence. Üner Kirdar expresses a similar view in the following words:

These global issues call for joint policy action that goes beyond the short-term interests of national states with different levels of development and different political regimen. They are indeed the global challenges of the international community, ranging from the economic requirements of finance, trade and monetary exchanges to the social needs for food, health, education and employment, from energy to ecology, from information to new discoveries in genetics and biotechnology. Most of these challenges are dealt with not only through the framework of national states or by a limited group of states, but also at sectoral levels. Many of the crucial

problems affecting the well-being of a large segment of humanity today can no longer be solved by strictly national fragmented efforts. The rate of change in and the growth of the dimensions of these types of issues transcend the ability of individual states, self-determined national policies and classically defined sectoral disciplines.¹

In order for global cooperation to be effective, people's beliefs, behavior, and modes of interaction have to change significantly. Both at the individual, group and organizational, national and international levels, this complex situation calls for greater tolerance and appreciation of other cultures and an ability to understand people who are different from us.

As the 1990s progress, we cannot help but ponder what lies ahead of us as inhabitants of planet Earth. Major historical events that marked the launching of the decade should not be taken lightly. The crumbling of the Berlin wall resulting in German reunification, the dismantling of the U.S.S.R. political system, the release of Nelson Mandela and talks about ending the apartheid system of South Africa, the Middle East peace talks, the renewed role of the U.N., all are striking events that mark a turning point in world history. Do these events mean the beginning of total world peace, the end of hunger, poverty, and political turmoil that characterize many countries? To the optimist, the obvious answer is "yes;" to the pessimist, the response is "no;" and to the middle-of-the-road individual, the answer is "maybe." Although this question evokes different responses, the solution to the problems listed above lies in an ability to work together and respect people from other cultures.

Developing an appreciation of other cultures is a difficult process given the fact that our past has been rooted in divisions based on race, class, religion, gender, ethnicity, residence, and age. We need to look at the world from a perspective that does not equate difference with inferiority. Such an approach sees human beings the world over as striving to make meaning out of life and adapt to their environments. It is a result of a conscious effort to understand and respect fellow human beings irrespective of whether they are like us or different from us. It also calls for empathy toward those whose conditions are less desirable than our own. By being objective and nonjudgemental, we will gain a better understanding of world conditions.

NEED FOR GLOBAL EDUCATION

The rapid changes in the world call for educational institutions to seize the opportunity to equip students with skills that will enable them to deal effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. Education has always been and continues to be an avenue for change. Major world breakthroughs in medicine, technology, the arts, and other areas have been facilitated by educational institutions. Even in the most simple society, education is highly valued as the medium through which values are inculcated in succeeding generations.

As we move into the era of globalization, educators need to teach students survival techniques in the global village. Brown² strongly argues that social change occurs when people change the way they perceive some elements constituting their world. He goes on to say that change can be spurred by a charismatic leader, a dramatic event, or a gradual awakening through education. People cross a "perceptual threshold" and begin seeing some aspects of their world in a new light.

In order to avoid applying a "band-aid" approach to global education, we must provide a philosophical base that fosters a belief in equity for all human beings. This philosophy needs to emphasize that all people, at any level of technology or social development, have the capacity to contribute to the good of the world if given a chance. An education grounded in this type of reasoning would free learners from fear of the unknown.

Besides being an avenue to fostering world peace, global education helps people to carry out day-to-day transactions. By showing them how entangled their lives are in the world socioeconomic and geopolitical context, such education prepares the students to make informed choices. They also develop skills and attitudes for effectively living in a world possessing limited natural resources, ethnic diversity, and characterized by interdependence. Research shows that people who have been exposed to other cultures have an advantage in handling conflict and problem-solving.³

Gang,⁴ a strong believer in education, posits that if we are able to see the historical turning point at which we stand, we can then move deliberately and consciously to influence our direction. Speaking strongly in favor of global education, Muller,⁵ a retired assistant secretary-general of the United Nations, states the following:

We must give a global vision to all the world's children, teach them about the miracle and sanctity of life, the necessity for love for our planet, for our great human family, for the heavens and for the creator of all these marvels. We must teach them rules of good behavior towards our global home and all our human sisters and brothers, so as to ensure peace, justice and happiness for all.

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A Changing World

"I am a citizen, not of Athens or Greece, but of the world."—SOCRATES

Available data and evidence provided by recent world events point in the direction of a changing world. Changes permeate all areas of human activity including population, business, technology, the general lifestyle, work relations, and roles of women.

POPULATION

At the beginning of the 1970s, the world population was about 3.5 billion people, which increased to 4 billion by 1974. With approximately 83 million people added every year, it did not take long to reach the 5 billion mark in July of 1987. There are no signs indicating that population growth will slow down markedly in the near future. In fact, it is projected to reach 6.3 billion by the year 2000 (see Table 2.1 on pages 6–7).¹ Population distribution and the allocation of resources among the world's people will be issues of great concern at international meetings. The fact that China alone accounts for 20 percent of the world population means that choices in the global market place are highly influenced by the Chinese.

Of equal importance are those residing in the Third world countries who constitute 75 percent. They produce and consume world products, contribute ideas to international politics, and are major players in the peace process. Their plea for equity, justice and human rights cannot be ignored or paid lip service in an era of global interdependence. Concerns over issues like pollution, natural resource depletion, and environmental degradation will not be meaningful unless all people, whether rich or poor, are given an equal hearing. The world inflation of the 1970s

was proof of the fact that indeed people share the world. They flourish or perish together. Hiding from this reality can be compared to someone pretending that no other life form exists on planet earth except his/her own.

BUSINESS

The era of isolationism in business ventures is over. Strong regional centers are replacing economic entities built around individual nations. The concept of "comparative advantage" is going to be more evident in the future than ever before. Naisbitt and Aburden² remark that the new era of globalization has begun and that there is an international call to environmentalism. They add that among nations, the desire for economic cooperation is stronger than the urge for military adventure.

Since the 1960s, U.S. multinational corporations have moved several manufacturing operations abroad. By the 1980s, they were manufacturing and selling nearly three times as much in foreign countries as they made and exported from the United States. General Electric, for example, produces half a billion dollars worth of cassette recorders, microwave ovens, room air conditioners, and telephones in Asian nations every year. Close examination of economic realities shows that during the 1950s the United States made over 80 percent of the world's automobiles. This figure has come down to a little over 20 percent presently. While only 50 percent of U.S. industries faced foreign competition four decades ago, currently 75 percent are under constant pressure to keep up with foreign operations. The banking situation has also changed dramatically, with the Japanese managing the world's ten largest banks.³

Karmin adds the following points to this important debate:

U.S. holdings overseas totaled \$308.8 billion in 1987.

In China alone, the United States has committed over \$3.5 billion to six hundred joint ventures.

In the Soviet Union, joint ventures swelled from 200 in 1988 to more than 1,000 in 1989.

IBM has proposed a \$1 billion plan to build advanced versions of computer memory chips in Japan.

More than 8,000 U.S. companies have operations in foreign countries.

More than 40 states keep offices overseas to solicit investments.⁴

TECHNOLOGY

Technology has not only taken human beings to the moon but has also facilitated greater contact between people from different cultures. At the pressing of a button,

TABLE 1.1 Estimated and Projected Population Size by Region, 1950–2025

Region	Population (millions)				
	1950	1970	1990	2000	2025
World Total	2,516	3,698	5,292	6,261	8,504
Industrialized countries	832	1,049	1,207	1,264	1,354
Developing countries	1,684	2,649	4,086	4,997	7,150
Africa	222	363	642	867	1,597
North America	166	226	276	295	332
Latin America	166	286	448	538	757
Asia	1,377	2,102	3,113	3,713	4,912
Europe	393	460	498	510	515
Oceania	13	19	26	30	38
U.S.S.R.	180	243	289	308	352

Source: United Nations Population Division, *World Population Prospects 1990* (United Nations, New York 1991), pp. 226–233, 244–245, 252–255, 264–265, 274–275, and 582–583.

for example, one can easily transact business between New York and any other major city in the world. Tremendous volumes of information can be shared through computers. The common stock market is proof that even private affairs like those regarding monetary resources are shared worldwide. Our economic behavior is not only monitored by family members and those with whom we share cultural values, but by those foreign to us as well. With sophisticated banking methods and the use of credit cards, it is no longer necessary for people to carry large sums of currency from country to country. In addition, satellites which enable people to communicate with each other across vast water and land masses have made it possible for people to share and process information much faster than was possible previously. It also means that physical contact may not be all that necessary if a bond can be established and maintained between various individuals through the use of communication technology.

Freedom to travel has also been greatly enhanced. In 1980, for example, 22 million Americans went abroad, compared to 41.2 million in 1988. Travel into the United States has also been made easier. While 18.6 million tourists from abroad visited the United States in 1977, the figure rose to 22 million in 1980 and 30 million in 1988.⁵ Other types of visitors to the United States include diplomats and business and professional leaders of various types. While some stay for short periods, ranging from days to a few weeks, others remain in the country for months and even years. Many of those who stay for extended periods of time are foreign students.⁶ The United States has the largest foreign student population of any country. These students account for 2.7 percent of enrollments in institutions of higher learning. During the 1988–89 academic year, for example, there were 366,354 foreign students enrolled at accredited U.S. universities and colleges,

TABLE 1.1 *continued*

Region	Percent Share of World Population				
	1950	1970	1990	2000	2025
World Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Industrialized countries	33.1	28.4	22.8	20.2	15.9
Developing countries	66.9	71.6	77.2	79.8	84.1
Africa	8.8	9.8	12.1	13.8	18.8
North America	6.6	6.1	5.2	4.7	3.9
Latin America	6.6	7.7	8.5	8.6	8.9
Asia	54.7	56.8	58.8	59.3	57.8
Europe	15.6	12.4	9.4	8.1	6.1
Oceania	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4
U.S.S.R.	7.2	6.6	5.5	4.9	4.1

accounting for an increase of 2.9 percent from the previous year. Over 50 percent of them come from China, Taiwan, Japan, and other East Asian countries. The second highest percentage come from Latin American countries. Other foreign students come from European countries including Spain, France, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany. Some come from the Eastern European countries and Canada. Although the number of African and Middle Eastern students has declined over the recent past, there is still a substantial group that provides a remarkable cultural mix.

IMMIGRATION

Besides the movement of people who visit other countries for a short period of time, there are those who decide to stay permanently. The United States has always provided sanctuary to people fleeing from oppression of one type or another. Since the 1950s, the number of immigrants to the United States has steadily been rising. As demonstrated in Table 1.2, the largest number of legal immigrants are from Latin American and Asian countries. This offers a sharp contrast to the 1960s period when the largest number of immigrants came from Europe and Canada.

While the number of European immigrants to the United States has declined over the years, migration from other regions has steadily increased, bringing in cultures that are distinctly different from the traditional Euro-American culture. The excerpt below illustrates this complex situation:

The American ethnic mosaic is being fundamentally altered; ethnicity itself is being redefined, its new images reified in the popular media and reflected in myriad and often surprising ways. Immigrants from a score of