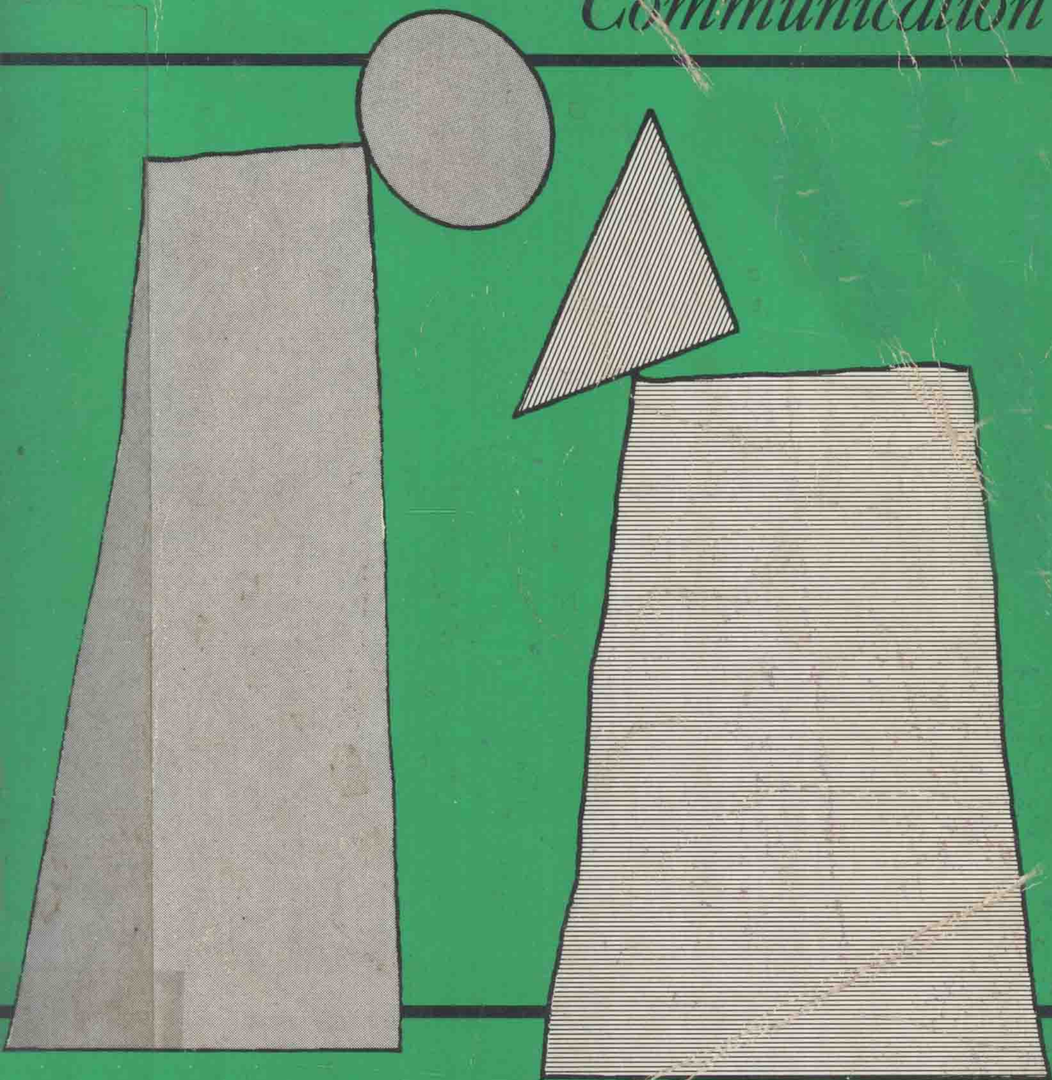
COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS

An Approach to Intercultural Communication



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An Approach to Intercultural Communication

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Communicating with Strangers

Preface

Anyone who communicates with people from other cultures, either for pleasure or as part of his or her job, should find this book useful. For example, Foreign Service officers, Peace Corps volunteers, businesspersons in multinational corporations, social workers, teachers in integrated schools, staff members of hospitals in urban settings, and police officers dealing with ethnic communities should find this book helpful in the performance of their work.

We concentrate on theoretical issues more than do many of the existing analyses of intercultural communication. In order to understand the process of intercultural communication and to improve intercultural effectiveness, it is crucial to have the relevant conceptual tools. Following Kurt Lewin, we believe that a good theoretical perspective is also highly practical; it provides a framework by which many specific phenomena in real-life situations–for example, our encounters with people from other cultures–can be described and explained more accurately.

The enormous complexity and scope of the process of intercultural communication necessitates the use of perspectives and concepts from diverse academic disciplines, including social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, and sociolinguistics, and, of course, communication. We owe an intellectual debt to Georg Simmel, sociologist, and Edward T. Hall, anthropologist, whose work significantly influences our approach to intercultural communication.

To organize the various elements of the process of intercultural communication, we present a model of intercultural communication in Part One. Our model is based on the premise that communication between people from different cultures is essentially the same as communication between people from different subcultures. In fact, we go even further to assume that all interactions between people share essentially the same underlying communication process, which we outline in Part One.

We conceptualize the common underlying process of communication with people who are unknown and unfamiliar as communication with strangers. In

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this view, intercultural communication is a special case only in the sense that the unknown and unfamiliar qualities of strangers are primarily culturally based. This fact, in turn, permeates all other sources of interpersonal differences, including sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental influences, on which we elaborate in Part Two.

Our communication with strangers presents the challenge of having to understand their cultural backgrounds and their communication patterns. As we acquire knowledge of how strangers express themselves and interpret the world, we also recognize the fundamental universalities of communication that are shared by people in all cultures. In Part Three we look at some of the recognized variations and universalities of human communication.

The development of interpersonal relationships with strangers requires that we have some understanding of their culture and patterns of communication and that they have some understanding of ours. Being able to communicate effectively plays a vital role in determining the nature and the quality of the relationships we establish with strangers. As our relationships with strangers become more meaningful, we begin to deal with the strangers, who in the meantime, go through a process of cultural adaptation into our environment. Through cumulative experiences of communicating with strangers, we, as well as the strangers, may enter the process of becoming intercultural–a gradual change of psychic growth beyond our respective cultural parameters. Through intercultural communication, we are therefore able to broaden our perspective on life, people, and ourselves and to expand our behavioral capacity to adapt in our changing world. In Part Four we discuss these and other related topics.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to friends and colleagues who contributed their time and expertise in reviewing various versions of the book. The "official" reviewers—Milton Bennett, Larry Sarbaugh, and Dennis Tafoya—read the entire manuscript and provided detailed critiques and suggestions. Even though we did not incorporate all of their suggestions, their comments were invaluable in helping us to clarify our thinking. Several others who reviewed various chapters and gave us useful feedback include Gordon Craigo, Huber Ellingsworth, Joan Hojek, Lois Silverman, and Stella Ting-Toomey. In addition, we want to thank San Rao, who encouraged us to write the book, and Linda Fisher, our editor, who was a constant source of support throughout the completion of the manuscript.

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PART ONE

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

On April 8, 1960, the world entered a new era. On this date, the first attempt was made to "communicate" with extraterrestrial life as part of Project Ozma organized by Frank Drake of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Green Bank, West Virginia. Although this first attempt was "passive" in that no attempt was made to transmit signals to extraterrestrial beings, Pioneer 10—launched on March 3, 1972—included a six-by-nine-inch gold-plated aluminum plaque with a message for any extraterrestrial being coming across it. The plaque on Pioneer 10 was designed by the astronomer Carl Sagan. The left side of the plaque contained a representation of the periods of pulsars to indicate the solar system of origin, while across the bottom the planets of the solar system were drawn with an indication that Pioneer 10 originated on the third planet. The right side of the plaque contained drawings of unclothed male and female figures, the man having his right arm raised with the palm extending outward. Pictures of the plaque appeared in newspapers around the world when Pioneer 10 was launched.

What does the plaque on Pioneer 10 have to do with the study of intercultural communication? Think about it for a moment. Does the plaque have anything in common with your attempts to communicate with people from other cultures? The plaque illustrates what often happens when two people who do not share a common language try to communicate—they try to get their ideas

across nonverbally. Reactions to the plaque when it appeared in newspapers around the world further illustrate what can happen when we use this method in our everyday encounters with people from other cultures. People in some cultures interpreted the man's gesture to be a universal gesture of friendliness, while people in other cultures interpreted it as one of hostility. One can only imagine how extraterrestrial beings would interpret the gesture; they might take it to mean that one arm of one of the sexes is permanently angled at the elbow while that of the other sex is not. The point is that gestures used by people in one culture often do not mean the same thing in another culture. Trying to communicate through nonverbal means may, therefore, lead to misunderstandings.

In order to minimize misunderstandings when we communicate with people from other cultures, we need to understand the process of intercultural communication. The importance of understanding this process is called to our attention by two former presidents of the United States:

> So let us not be blind to our differences, but let us direct our attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can make the world safe for diversity.
>
> John F. Kennedy

> It is . . . in our interest—and the interest of other nations—that Americans have the opportunity to understand the histories, cultures and problems of others, so that we can understand their hopes, perceptions and aspirations. [These efforts] will contribute to our capacity as a people and a government to manage our foreign affairs with sensitivity, in an effective and responsible way.
>
> Jimmy Carter

These two former presidents imply that understanding people of other cultures and their patterns of communication is important not only to decrease misunderstandings but also to make the world a safer place in which to live.

Throughout the book we focus on the concepts necessary to understand people from other cultures, their patterns of communication, and our interactions with them. More specifically, our intent is to present a framework for understanding your encounters with people from other cultures and subcultures, for determining when misunderstandings occur, and for improving the effectiveness of your intercultural communication.

The purpose of Part One is to outline our perspective on communication in general and intercultural communication in particular. In Chapter 1 we specify the assumptions we make about the process of communication and define the two major terms, communication and culture, used in the book. Our approach to intercultural communication is presented in Chapter 2, where we examine the concept of the stranger and outline the model we use to organize the elements in the process of communication.

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1
Introduction

We travel together, passengers on a little spaceship, dependent upon its vulnerable resources of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and I will say the love we give our fragile craft.

Adlai Stevenson

In the past most human beings were born, lived, and died within a limited geographical area, never encountering people of other races and/or cultural backgrounds. Such an existence, however, no longer prevails in the world. Even once isolated groups of people like the Tasadays in the Philippines now frequently have contact with other cultural groups. Marshall McLuhan characterizes today's world as a "global village" because of the rapid expansion of worldwide communication networks (e.g., jet airplanes, communication satellites, and telephones). It is now possible for any person from an industrialized country to communicate with any person in another industrialized country within minutes by phone or within hours face to face. In fact, we are at a point in history when important or interesting events (presidential debates in the United States, major sporting events, royal weddings, etc.) in one country are often transmitted simultaneously to more than 100 different countries.

The expansion of worldwide communication networks, combined with increases in travel for pleasure or business and in international migration of refugees, heightens our awareness of the need for understanding other cultures and their people. The work of the Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979) illustrates this increased awareness. In their final report to the president of the United States, the Commission points out:

> Nothing less is at issue than the nation's security. At a time when the resurgent forces of nationalism and of ethnic and linguistic consciousness so directly affect global realities, the United States requires far more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of potential adversaries, and earn the trust and sympathies of the uncommitted. Yet there is a widening gap between these needs and the American competence to understand and deal successfully with other peoples in a world in a flux. (pp. 1–2)

The Commission sets forth a number of recommendations in order for the people of the United States to understand and deal successfully with other peoples of the world, including increased foreign language instruction, more international educational exchanges, citizen education in international affairs, and increases in international training for business and government personnel. Although it is not stated explicitly, central to most of the Commission's recommendations is the need for an increased awareness and understanding of communication between people from different cultures.

In a world of international interdependence, the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from other cultures takes on greater urgency. The need for intercultural understanding, however, does not begin or end with national boundaries. Within any nation a multitude of racial and ethnic groups exist, and their members interact daily. Recent legislation and legal rulings in the United States on affirmative action, school busing, and desegregation underscore the importance of nondiscriminatory contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups. To accomplish this end, people of different racial and ethnic groups need to understand one another's cultures and patterns of communication.

It is recognized widely that one of the characteristics separating humans from other animals is our development of culture. The development of human culture is made possible through communication, and it is through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that one writer, Edward T. Hall (1959), has maintained "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." In other words, we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms. Because we learn the language, rules, and norms of our culture by a very early age (between five and ten years old), however, we generally are unaware of how culture influences our behavior in general and our communication in particular.

When we communicate with people from other cultures, we often are confronted with languages, rules, and norms different from our own. Confronting these differences can be a source of insight into the rules and norms of our own culture, as well as being a source of frustration or gratification. Although the presence of cultural differences may suggest the need for accommodation in our communication, it cannot be taken automatically as either a "barrier" or a

"facilitator" of effective communication (Ellingsworth, 1977). Communication between people from different cultures can be as effective as communication between people from the same culture (Taylor and Simard, 1975). Stated in another way, communicating with a person from another culture may be either easier or more difficult than communicating with someone from the same culture.

One of the major factors influencing our effectiveness in communicating with people from other cultures is our ability to understand their culture. It probably is impossible to understand the communication of people from other cultures if we are highly ethnocentric. Sumner (1940) characterizes ethnocentrism as the "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (p. 27). Ethnocentrism leads people to see their own culture's ways of doing things as "right" and all others as "wrong." While the tendency to make judgments according to our own cultural standards is natural, it hinders our understanding of other cultures and the patterns of communication of their people.

Becoming more culturally relativistic, on the other hand, can be conducive to understanding. Cultural relativism suggests the only way we can understand the behavior of others is in the context of their culture. Herskovits (1973) succinctly summarizes this position when he says evaluations must be "relative to the cultural background out of which they arise" (p. 14). He goes on to argue, "judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his enculturation" (p. 15). In other words, no one cultural trait is "right" or "wrong"; it is merely "different" from alternative cultural traits. This is not to say we must never make value judgments of people in other cultures. Making them is often necessary. Postponing these value judgments, or recognizing their tentative nature, until adequate information is gathered, however, greatly facilitates understanding.

The purpose of this book is to provide the conceptual tools needed to understand culture, communication, how culture influences communication, and the process of communication between people from different cultures. Such knowledge is extremely important—in fact, necessary—if we are to comprehend fully the daily events of today's multicultural world. The concepts discussed should help you to better understand your communication with people from other cultures and many international situations such as the holding of United States diplomats in Iran. Understanding the material presented should help you not only to analyze your intercultural encounters in order to determine where misunderstandings occur but also to determine how these misunderstandings can be minimized in future interactions.

Before proceeding further, we must be more specific about what we mean when we use the terms communication, culture, and intercultural communication. In the next section we outline the assumptions we make about the nature of communication. Following this we examine the concept of culture and develop a working definition for intercultural communication.

CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNICATION

Everyone communicates, and thus has a preconceived notion of what communication is and how it takes place. Our purpose here is to specify our preconceived notions about the nature of communication. It is not necessary for you to agree with our conceptualization; however, while reading the remainder of the book, you need to remember we take the ideas expressed here for granted. Because we take these ideas for granted, we present them as assumptions.

Assumption 1: Communication Is a Symbolic Activity

Communication involves the use of symbols. Symbols are things used to stand for, or represent, something else. Symbols are not limited to words; they also include nonverbal displays and other objects (e.g., the flag). The important thing to remember is symbols are symbols only because a group of people agree to consider them as such. There is no natural connection between any symbol and its referent; the relationships are arbitrary and vary from culture to culture. Bram (1955) points out:

> The relationship between symbols and the "things" which they symbolize is not a self-evident or natural one. . . . Symbols derive their specific function from group consensus or social convention and have no effect whatever (outside their rather trivial physical characteristics) on any person not acquainted with such consensus or convention. (p. 2)

It is the human ability to utilize symbols that makes possible the development of speech and language and the capacity to deal with relationships among people and objects in the absence of those people and objects.

Assumption 2: Communication Is a Process Involving the Encoding and Decoding of Messages

Since it is impossible to transmit electrical impulses directly from our brain to that of another person, it is necessary for us to put our ideas into codes that can be transmitted, either verbally or nonverbally. *Encoding* refers to the process of putting thoughts, feelings, emotions, or attitudes, for example, in a form recognizable by others. The symbols used may be written, verbal, nonverbal, mathematical, or musical, to cite only a few. We refer to the encoded set of symbols as a message. *Decoding* is the process of perceiving and interpreting, or making sense of, incoming messages and stimuli from the environment. How we encode and decode messages is influenced by our experiential background, including not only our unique individual experiences but also our shared group and cultural ones.

Berlo (1960) points out if we conceptualize communication as a process,

"we view events and relationships as dynamic, on-going, ever-changing, continuous. . . . we also mean that it does not have a beginning, an end, a fixed sequence of events. It is not static, at rest. It is moving. The ingredients within a process interact: each affects all of the others" (p. 24). Viewing communication as a process, therefore, allows for recognition of its continuity, complexity, unrepeatability, and irreversibility.

To say communication is a process is to recognize that the encoding and decoding of messages take place simultaneously. We do not simply encode a message and then wait for a response to decode. Rather, we continually are encoding and decoding information simultaneously whenever we communicate. The information we decode influences what we encode, and what we encode influences how we decode incoming stimuli.

Assumption 3: Communication Is Transactional

Communication is the "product of both environmental objects (or stimuli) and internal mental states" (Miller and Steinberg, 1975, p. 38). Not only do the environment and objects in it influence our communication, but our perceptions of the environment also influence the way we behave. Viewing communication as a transaction further implies that the people with whom we communicate have an impact on us and we have an impact on them.

If communication is a transaction, then the meanings we attach to encoded messages are a function of the messages, the people who encoded the messages, the environment (or context) in which the communication takes place, and our "conceptual filters." Conceptual filters, according to Fisher (1978), "comprise the internal states of the human organism. . . . They are not directly observable . . . but are assumed to affect the communicative event significantly" (p. 145).

Although messages can be transmitted from one person to another, meanings cannot. Since meanings are not determined solely by the message, the net result of any communication is a partial difference between the meanings held by the communicators. In other words, the meaning of the message one person encodes is never exactly the same as the meaning another person decodes. "To say that meaning in communication is never totally the same for all communicators is not to say that communication is impossible or even difficult—only that it is imperfect" (Fisher, 1978, p. 257).

Assumption 4: Communication Takes Place at Varying Levels of Awareness

As we are socialized into our culture, we learn much of our behavior unconsciously. Learning to walk is a good illustration. No one told us to do this and that when we learned to walk. We just did it and eventually mastered it. Much of our communication behavior was learned the same way. Because we learned

much of it unconsciously, we are not usually aware of our behavior when we communicate.

Several recent writers have taken the position that a large amount of social interaction occurs at very low levels of awareness (see, for example, Abelson, 1976; Berger, 1982; Langer, 1978). These writers argue, and we concur, that we behave with low levels of awareness in situations we consider "normal," or routine. When we encounter new or novel situations, however, we become aware of our behavior (our behavior is consciously enacted). One difference to be expected between our communication with people from our own culture and people from other cultures, therefore, is the level of awareness we have of our behavior. We are more aware of our behavior with people who are from other cultures than we are of our behavior with people from our own culture. This is because interaction with people from other cultures is less routine; it involves new and novel situations.

Assumption 5: Communicators Make Predictions About the Outcomes of Their Communication Behavior

Miller and Steinberg (1975) argue: "When people communicate, they make predictions about the effects, or outcomes, of their communication behaviors; that is, they choose among various communicative strategies on the basis of how the person receiving the message will respond" (p. 7). These authors go on to recognize that communication behaviors, including predictions, are not always conscious. Specifically, they argue that awareness of making predictions varies with the degree to which we are aware of alternative outcomes for the situation in which we find ourselves. The more aware we are of alternative outcomes, the more aware we are of making predictions. When our behavior is unconscious (outside of our awareness), generally we are not aware of making predictions. When our behavior is conscious, we are more aware of the predictions we make.

Assumption 6: Intention Is Not a Necessary Condition for Communication

This assumption is derived from the first of three axioms of communication proposed by Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967): "one cannot not communicate" (p. 51, emphasis deleted). The basis for this axiom is any behavior, or the absence of any behavior, communicates something if there is someone in the environment to notice the behavior, or its absence. In making this assumption, we are not contending all behavior is communication; rather, communication occurs any time one person attributes meaning to his or her own or another person's behavior. Taking this view implies it is not necessary for a person to transmit a message intentionally in order to communicate. Many intercultural misunderstandings, in fact, are due to the unintentional behavior of a person from one

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