

Judith N. Martin
Thomas K. Nakayama

Intercultural Communication in Contexts



INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXTS

Judith N. Martin
Thomas K. Nakayama
Arizona State University



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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTEXTS

PREFACE

The field of intercultural communication has been an exciting area of study for the past 50 years; currently, it is undergoing the growing pains of a rapidly maturing field. Those who teach and conduct research in intercultural communication face an increasing number of challenges, and difficult questions often arise: Is it enough to identify differences among people? Are we actually reinforcing stereotypes in emphasizing differences? Is there a way to understand the dynamics of intercultural communication without resorting to lists of instructions? Don't we have to talk about the larger social, political, and historical contexts when we teach intercultural communication?

We wrote this textbook to address these and other questions. Although the foundation of intercultural communication theory and research has always been interdisciplinary, the field is now informed by identifiable and competing paradigms. In this book, we attempt to integrate three different research approaches: (1) the traditional *social psychological* approach that emphasizes cultural differences and how these differences influence communication, (2) the *interpretive* approach that emphasizes understanding communication in context, and (3) the more recent *critical* approach that underscores the importance of power and historical context in understanding intercultural communication.

We believe that each of these approaches has important contributions to make to the understanding of intercultural communication. We begin this book by discussing the more traditional, difference-based, social psychological approach; we then weave in the interpretive and critical approaches, with their greater emphases on context and power.

Throughout, we acknowledge that there are no easy answers to the difficult questions of intercultural communication. Sometimes our discussions raise more questions than they answer. We believe that this is as it should be at this point in time. Not only is the field of intercultural communication changing, but the relationship between culture and communication is—and probably always will be—complex and dynamic.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Students usually come to the field of intercultural communication with knowledge about many different cultural groups, including their own. This knowledge

comes from television, movies, books, personal experiences, news media, and other sources. But many students have a difficult time assimilating information that does not fit neatly into their pre-existing way of thinking. In this book, we move students slowly to the notion of a dialectical framework for thinking about cultural knowledge. That is, we show that knowledge can be acquired in many different ways—through social scientific studies, experience, media reports, and so on—but these differing forms of knowledge need to be seen dynamically and in relation to each other. Through a number of features, we offer students ways to begin thinking about intercultural communication in a dialectical manner. These features include the following:

- An explicit discussion of differing research approaches to intercultural communication, focusing on both strengths and limitations.
- Attention to history, popular culture, and identity as important factors in understanding intercultural communication.
- “Student Voices”—boxes in which students relate their own experiences and share their thoughts about various intercultural communication issues.
- “Point of View”—boxes in which diverse viewpoints from news media, research studies, and other public forums are presented.
- Incorporation of our own personal experiences to highlight particular aspects of intercultural communication.

In addition, the *Instructor’s Resource Manual* includes pedagogical tips, discussion questions, and sample syllabi designed to help the instructor teach the course and handle the challenges that arise because of the controversial nature of much of the material.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

We begin our discussion with a look at the changing dynamics of social life and the impact of such changes on the study of intercultural communication. We consider technological changes, global migration, ethnic conflicts, and other worldwide phenomena that make the study of intercultural communication more imperative than ever.

In Chapter 2 we provide some background on the academic study of intercultural communication and discuss the three principal theoretical approaches that inform the field. We also introduce our own dialectical approach, with its four components of culture, communication, context, and power. In Chapter 3 we elaborate on this framework and explore the relationships among the components and concepts.

Chapter 4 focuses on identity. We first discuss the traditional approach, in which identity is seen as a static concept based on categories like gender and ethnicity. We then present an alternative perspective, showing that identity can be understood as a culturally constructed process. In Chapter 5 we discuss

the central place of history in intercultural communication, and we then consider how cultural group histories may contribute to contemporary intercultural communication.

Chapter 6 addresses language, both as a set of components (semantics, syntactics, and so forth) that influence perception of social reality and as a social practice in which power relations are embedded. Chapter 7 explores nonverbal codes and cultural space and their centrality to intercultural communication.

In Chapter 8 we discuss intercultural transitions, focusing first on cultural adaptation, then on the impact of adaptation on identity, and finally on the multiple transitions made by those individuals who live in the borders of cultural contexts.

In Chapter 9 we explore the influence of popular culture on intercultural communication, looking particularly at how people consume popular culture, how they resist it, and how it influences perceptions of other cultures. In Chapter 10 we focus on intercultural relationships, emphasizing that relational development occurs within larger social and political contexts. We look at the role of culture in a variety of relationships, including dating and marriage, gay and lesbian relationships, family relationships, and interethnic relationships.

Chapter 11 discusses the inevitability of conflict in intercultural relations. We look at the context of such conflict—interpersonal, social, political—and suggest new ways of thinking about the relationship between culture and conflict. We also discuss strategies for managing conflict in these various contexts.

Finally, in Chapter 12, we turn to the outlook for intercultural communication. We discuss ethics in intercultural communication, incorporating many of the issues addressed in earlier chapters. We also reinforce the dialectical framework introduced earlier and encourage students to think about their many ways of knowing in a dynamic, relational way.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The random convergence of the two authors in time and place led to the creation of this textbook. We both found ourselves at Arizona State University in the early 1990s. Over the course of several years, we discussed and analyzed the multiple approaches to intercultural communication. Much of this discussion was facilitated by the ASU Department of Communication's "culture and communication" theme. Department faculty met to discuss research and pedagogical issues relevant to the study of communication and culture; we also reflected on our own notions of what constituted intercultural communication. This often meant reliving many of our intercultural experiences and sharing them with our colleagues.

For us, the risks of undertaking a co-authoring project were minimal, because, through our dialogues about intercultural communication, we had established a confident relationship and a strong friendship. The completion of this project is also due to the patience and assistance of our friends and family.

Above all, we must recognize the enduring persistence and faith in us of Holly J. Allen, our editor at Mayfield Publishing Company. Her long contact with Judith lay the groundwork for our collaboration on this project. Holly's encouragement was instrumental in the completion of this book. In addition, we want to thank all the readers and reviewers of the earlier versions of the manuscript. Their comments and careful readings were enormously helpful. In particular, thanks to Rosita D. Albert, University of Minnesota; Carlos G. Alemán, University of Illinois, Chicago; Deborah Cai, University of Maryland; Gail Campbell, University of Colorado, Denver; Ling Chen, University of Oklahoma; Alberto González, Bowling Green State University; Bradford 'J' Hall, University of New Mexico; Mark Lawrence McPhail, University of Utah; Richard Morris, Northern Illinois University; Catherine T. Motoyama, College of San Mateo; Gordon Nakagawa, California State University, Northridge; Joyce M. Ngoh, Marist College; Nancy L. Street, Bridgewater State College; Erika Vora, St. Cloud State University; Lee B. Winet, SUNY Oswego; and Gust A. Yep, San Francisco State University.

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We thank our families and friends for allowing us long absences and silences as we directed our energies toward the completion of this book. We want to acknowledge both Ron Chaldu and David L. Karbonski, who did not "go nuclear" despite being saddled with more than their share of redirected burdens. A number of people made it possible for us to take international trips—Kazuko and Tommy Nakayama; Michel Dion and Eliana Sampaio; and Jerzy, Alicja, Marek, and Jolanta Drzewieccy. We are grateful for their support. Others helped us understand intercultural communication in our communities, especially the staff and students at the Guadalupe Learning Center at South Mountain Community College. We want to thank Dr. Amalia Villegas, Laura Laguna, Felipa Montiel, Cruzita Mori, and Amelia Hernandez.

In spirit and conceptualization, our book spans the centuries and crosses many continents. It has been shaped by the many people we have read about and encountered. It is to these guiding and inspiring individuals—some of whom we had the good fortune to meet and some of whom we will never encounter—that we dedicate this book. It is our hope that their spirit of curiosity, openness, and understanding will be reflected in the pages that follow.

TO THE STUDENT

Many textbooks emphasize in their introductions how you should use the text. In contrast, we begin this book by introducing ourselves and our interests in intercultural communication. There are many ways to think about intercultural interactions. One way to learn more about intercultural experiences is to engage in dialogue with others on this topic. Ideally, we would like to begin a dialogue with you about some of the ways to think about intercultural communication. Learning about intercultural communication is not about learning a finite set of skills, terms, and theories. It is about learning to think about cultural realities in multiple ways. Unfortunately, it is not possible for us to engage in dialogues with our readers.

Instead, we strive to lay out a number of issues to think about regarding intercultural communication. By reflecting upon these issues in your own interactions, and by talking with others about these issues, you will be well on your way to becoming both a better intercultural communicator and a better analyst of intercultural interactions. There is no endpoint from which we can say that we have learned all there is to know. Learning about communication is a lifelong process that involves experiences and analysis. We hope this book will generate many dialogues that will help you come to greater understanding of different cultures and peoples, and the complexity of intercultural communication.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The two authors of this book come to intercultural communication from very different backgrounds and very different research traditions. Yet, we believe that these differences offer a unique approach to thinking about intercultural communication. We briefly introduce ourselves here, but we hope that by the end of the book you will have a much more complete understanding of who we are. Simply labeling ourselves does not tell you who we are. Think about how you might describe yourself. Then, as you read this book, apply specific issues to yourself to find out how much information is missing from your initial self-description.

One of the authors, Judith Martin, grew up in Mennonite communities, primarily in Delaware and Pennsylvania. She has studied at the Université de Grenoble in France and has taught in Algeria. She received her doctorate at the

Pennsylvania State University. By background and training, she is a social scientist who has focused on intercultural communication on an interpersonal level and has studied how people's communication is affected as they move or sojourn between international locations. She has taught at the State University of New York at Oswego, the University of Minnesota, the University of New Mexico, and Arizona State University. She enjoys gardening, going to Mexico, and hosting annual Academy Awards parties, and she does not miss the harsh Midwestern winters.

The other author, Tom Nakayama, grew up mainly in Georgia, at a time when the Asian American presence was much less than what it is now. He has studied at the Université de Paris and various universities in the United States. He received his doctorate from the University of Iowa. By background and training, he is a critical rhetorician who views intercultural communication in a social context. He has taught at the California State University at San Bernardino and Arizona State University. He is a voracious reader and owns more books than any other faculty member in his department. He watches TV—especially baseball games—and lifts weights. Living in the West now, he misses springtime in the South.

The authors' very different life stories and research programs came together at Arizona State University. We have each learned much about intercultural communication through our own experiences, as well as through our intellectual pursuits. Judith has a well-established record of social science approaches to intercultural communication. Tom, in contrast, has taken a nontraditional approach to understanding intercultural communication by emphasizing critical perspectives. We believe that these differences in our lives and in our research offer complementary ways of understanding intercultural communication.

Since the early 1990s, we have engaged in many different dialogues about intercultural communication—focusing on our experiences, thoughts, ideas, and analyses—which led us to think about writing this textbook. But our interest was not primarily generated by these dialogues; rather, it was our overall interest in improving intercultural relations that motivated us. We believe that communication is an important arena for those relations to be improved. By helping people become more aware as intercultural communicators, we hope to make this a better world for all of us.

THE NEED FOR IMPROVED INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

We stand at the end of the century with the year 2000 looming before us. We know that we live in rapidly changing times. Although no one can foresee the future, we believe that changes are increasing the imperative for intercultural learning. In Chapter 1, you will learn more about some of these changes and their influence on intercultural communication.

You also stand at the front end of a textbook journey about intercultural communication. At this point, you might take stock of who you are, what your intercultural communication experiences have been, how you respond in those situations, and how you tend to think about those experiences. Some people respond to intercultural situations with amusement, curiosity, or interest; others may respond with hostility, anger, or fear. It is important to reflect on your experiences and to learn how you respond and what those reactions mean.

We also think it is helpful to realize that in many instances people do not want to communicate interculturally. Sometimes people see those who are culturally different as threatening, as forcing them to change. They may feel as if such people require more assistance and patience. Or they may simply think of them as “different.” People come to intercultural interactions from a variety of emotional states and attitudes; it is wrongheaded to assume that everyone wants to communicate interculturally. Because of this dynamic, many people have had negative intercultural experiences that influence subsequent intercultural interactions. Negative experiences can range from simple misunderstandings to physical violence. Although it may be unpleasant to discuss such situations, we believe that it is necessary to do so if we are serious about understanding and improving intercultural interaction.

Intercultural conflict can occur even when the participants do not intentionally provoke it. When we use our own cultural frames in intercultural settings, those hidden assumptions can provoke trouble. For example, when renting a small apartment in a private home in Grenoble, France, Judith invited a number of her U.S. friends who were traveling in Europe to stop by and stay with her. The angry and frustrated response that this drew from the landlady came as a surprise. She told Judith that she would have to pay extra for all of the water they were using, that the apartment was not a motel, and that Judith would have to move out if the practice of overnight guests continued. Differing notions of privacy and what it means to rent contributed to the conflict. Intercultural experiences are not always fun. Sometimes they are frustrating, confusing, and distressing.

On a more serious level, we might look at the beating of Rodney King by some members of the Los Angeles Police Department as yet another example of intercultural communication. The subsequent interpretations and reactions of that televised event by different communities of people reflect important differences in our society. The ensuing uprising, which some have called “riots” or “rebellion,” was indicative of the tremendous fury among various groups of people who experience life in Los Angeles in very different ways. These are all part of the complexity of intercultural communication. We do not come to intercultural interactions as blank slates; instead, we bring ourselves and our cultures.

Although the journey to developing awareness with intercultural communication is an individual one, it is important to recognize the connections we all have to many different aspects of social life. You are, of course, an individual. But you have been influenced by culture. The ways that others regard you and communicate with you are influenced largely by whom they perceive you to be. By

enacting cultural characteristics of masculinity or femininity, for example, you may elicit particular reactions from others. Reflect on your social and individual characteristics; consider how these characteristics communicate something about you.

Finally, there is no list of what to do in an intercultural setting. Although prescribed reactions might help you avoid serious faux pas in one setting or culture, such lists are generally too simplistic to get you very far in any culture and may cause serious problems in other cultures. The study of communication is both a science and an art. In this book we attempt to pull the best of both kinds of knowledge together for you. Because communication does not happen in a vacuum but is integral to the many dynamics that make it possible—economics, politics, technology—the ever-changing character of our world means that it is essential to develop a sensitivity and flexibility to change. It also means that you can never stop learning about intercultural communication.

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