

# COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS

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*An Approach  
to Intercultural  
Communication*

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*Third Edition*



WILLIAM B. GUDYKUNST  
YOUNG YUN KIM

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THIRD EDITION

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COMMUNICATING  
WITH STRANGERS

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AN APPROACH  
TO INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION

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## **COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS: An Approach to Intercultural Communication**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Bill's work focuses on developing a theory of interpersonal and intergroup effectiveness that can be applied to improving the quality of communication. Bill is the author of *Bridging Differences* (Sage, 1994), and coauthor of *Culture and Interpersonal Communication* (with S. Ting-Toomey, Sage, 1988), *Bridging Japanese/North American Differences* (with T. Nishida, Sage, 1994), and *Building Bridges* (with S. Ting-Toomey, S. Sudweeks, and L. Stewart, Houghton Mifflin, 1995). Among the books he has edited are *Intercultural Communication Theory* (Sage, 1983), *Intergroup Communication* (Edward Arnold, 1986), *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* (with M. Asante, Sage, 1989), *Communication in Japan and the United States* (State University of New York Press, 1994), and *Communication in Personal Relationships Across Cultures* (with S. Ting-Toomey and T. Nishida, Sage, 1996).

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# PREFACE

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This book is designed to be a text for a college course in intercultural communication, but anyone who communicates with people from other groups, either for pleasure or as part of his or her job, should find this book useful. Foreign Service Officers, Peace Corps volunteers, businesspersons in multinational or multiethnic corporations, social workers, teachers in integrated schools, staff members of hospitals in urban settings, and police officers dealing with ethnic communities, to name only a few groups, should find this book helpful in the performance of their work.

We focus on theoretical issues more than most authors of existing texts on intercultural communication. We believe that in order to understand the process of intercultural communication and to improve our intercultural effectiveness, we must have the conceptual tools to understand what is happening. Following Kurt Lewin, we believe that "there is nothing so practical as a good theory." Throughout the book, we apply the theories we have been developing over the last decade. Gudykunst's (1988b, 1993, 1995) theory of interpersonal and intergroup communication provides the conceptual foundation for most of the book. Kim's (1988, in press; Kim & Ruben, 1988) theories of adaptation and intercultural growth are used to organize Chapters 13 and 14. Although the book is grounded theoretically, we do not focus on presenting the theories. Rather, we "translate" the theories so that they can be applied to improving our communication with people from different cultures and/or ethnic groups.

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 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 in how we transmit and interpret messages and how these variations influence our communication with strangers.

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 and to man-

age conflict 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 have thoroughly updated the third edition. This third edition is much more coherent than previous editions. The perspective introduced in Part One is carried throughout the book. We have removed overly complex language and added examples to illustrate our points. In updating the various chapters, we have omitted redundancies and dropped material not found useful in the previous editions. We have added research that has been conducted in the years that have passed since the second edition was published.

We expanded on our discussion of our assumptions about the nature of communication and culture in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2, we reorganized the overview of our approach, adding material on interpersonal versus intergroup behavior as well as new material on anxiety/uncertainty management and mindfulness. Chapter 3 now focuses exclusively on dimensions of cultural variability (the material on norms and rules previously in this chapter was moved to Chapter 6). We expanded the discussion of individualism-collectivism and low- and high-context communication, adding a discussion of individual level factors (i.e., personality, self construals, and values) that mediate the influence of cultural individualism-collectivism on communication behavior. We expanded the discussion of Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability, presented a new theory of values, and added material on structural tightness. Chapter 4 now focuses on group memberships and social identities that influence our communication with strangers. We expanded our discussion of ethnic identity and added new material on identities based on gender, age, social class, and disabilities. Chapter 5 is still organized around the idea of expectations. We expanded our discussion of stereotypes and communication, and prejudice and communication, and added a section on responding to prejudice. In Chapter 6, we updated the material and added a new section on situational influences on communication. In addition, we incorporated the material on norms and rules previously included in Chapter 3.

The third part focuses on transmitting and interpreting messages. The perceptual and attributional processes are the focus of Chapter 7. The discussion of perception is new to this edition. The material on attributional processes was updated. Also included in this chapter is an updated discussion of how cognitive styles and patterns of thought influence our interpretation of messages. We reorganized and updated the discussion of differences in verbal messages across cultures in Chapter 8. The discussion of language in communicating with strangers was expanded (e.g., extensive new material on code-switching was added). We also added a new discussion of the causes of and solutions to problems of miscommunication with strangers. We revised the chapter on nonverbal

communication. It focuses on the recognition/expression of emotions, on contact, on interpersonal synchrony, and on what happens when our nonverbal expectations are violated.

The final part was reorganized and expanded. This part now begins with the chapter on being effective. This chapter (Chapter 10) was expanded and updated. Chapter 11 is a new chapter on managing conflict with strangers. This chapter includes discussion of cultural and ethnic differences in conflict, intergroup conflict, constructive conflict management, and skills for managing conflict. Chapter 12 focuses on developing interpersonal relationships with strangers. Material on interpersonal relationships (e.g., from Chapter 4 in the second edition) was moved to this chapter. The chapter was updated and expanded. Chapters 13 ("Adapting to New Cultures"), 14 ("Becoming Intercultural"), and 15 ("Building Community") were updated and expanded.

In revising the book, we have added figures and tables to clarify and summarize material in the text. In addition, we have provided study questions and suggested readings at the end of each chapter.

In updating the various chapters, we have adapted material from other books we have written (e.g., Gudykunst, 1994; Gudykunst et al., 1995; Kim, in press). To illustrate, the material in Chapter 2 on identities based on age, gender, social class, and disabilities, as well as the material on perception in Chapter 7, was adapted from Gudykunst (1994), while the material on situational influences on communication in Chapter 6 was adapted from Gudykunst et al. (1995).

Several people have influenced our approach to the study of intercultural communication and we want to take this opportunity to recognize them. The work of Harry C. Triandis and of Edward T. Hall is cited in virtually every chapter of the book. These two pioneers have had a profound effect on our work and on that of most other scholars in the area. We also want to recognize the influence of Georg Simmel, whose concept of the stranger provides the foundation for our approach. Charles Berger's work on uncertainty and Walter Stephan and Cookie Stephan's work on anxiety also serve as intellectual roots of the approach we take in the book.

Before concluding, we also want to express our gratitude to friends and colleagues who contributed their time and expertise in reviewing various versions of the book. San Rao initially encouraged us to write the book, and Linda Fisher, our editor at Addison-Wesley for the first edition, was a constant source of support throughout the completion of the original version of the manuscript. Hilary Jackson, our editor at McGraw-Hill for the second edition, encouraged us to improve the book and make it more useful to students. Peggy Henderson facilitated getting the third edition into production.

We also want to thank the people who provided valuable suggestions for this third edition. Numerous colleagues and students have provided constructive suggestions for revising the book over the years since the first edition was published. We cannot name all the people individually, but we want them to know that we appreciate their feedback. We have attempted to incorporate as many of the suggestions we received over the years as possible.

**Bill Gudykunst  
Young Kim**

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# PART ONE

## Conceptual Foundations

On April 8, 1960, the world entered a new era. On that 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. *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 our 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. We 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 our encounters with people from other cultures and subcultures, for determining when misunderstandings occur, and for improving the effectiveness of our 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.

# 1

## Introduction

*Greetings. I am pleased to see that we are different.  
May we together become greater than the sum of both of us.*  
Vulcan Greeting (*Star Trek*)

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 members of once isolated groups of people like the Tasadays in the Philippines now frequently have contact with members of other cultural groups. McLuhan (1962) characterizes today's world as a "global village" because of the rapid expansion of worldwide transportation and communication networks (e.g., 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, fax, or videoconference, and within hours, face-to-face. In fact, we are at a point in history when important or interesting events, such as wars, presidential debates in the United States, major sporting events, and royal weddings in one country, often are 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 its final report to the president of the United States, the commission points out that

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 [North] American competence to understand and deal successfully with other peoples in a world in a flux. (pp. 1-2)

The problems isolated by the presidential commission in 1979 are even more important today. The commission set 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. 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 extreme 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. 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 groups. The importance of good intergroup relations also is apparent when current demographic trends are examined. It is projected, for example, that in the near future, the workplace will change from a place dominated by European American (i.e., white) males to a place dominated by women, immigrants, and non-European American (i.e., nonwhite) ethnics (Hudson Institute, 1987). For work to be accomplished effectively in the multicultural organization, people of different groups need to understand one another's 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 Hall (1959) maintains that "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 of age), 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 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 to 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 & Simard, 1975). In other words, 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 cultures. It 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 us to see our 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 that the only way we can understand the behavior of others is in the context of their culture. Herskovits (1973) says behaviors must be understood “relative to the cultural background out of which they arise” (p. 14). 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 such value judgments, or recognizing their tentative nature, until adequate information is gathered and we understand the people from the other culture, however, greatly facilitates understanding and effective communication.

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

Given this brief introduction, we define 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 that presentation, we examine the concept of culture and develop a working definition for intercultural communication. We conclude this chapter by presenting our plan for the book.