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INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS

A Practical Guide

Richard W. Brislin
Kenneth Cushner
Craig Cherrie
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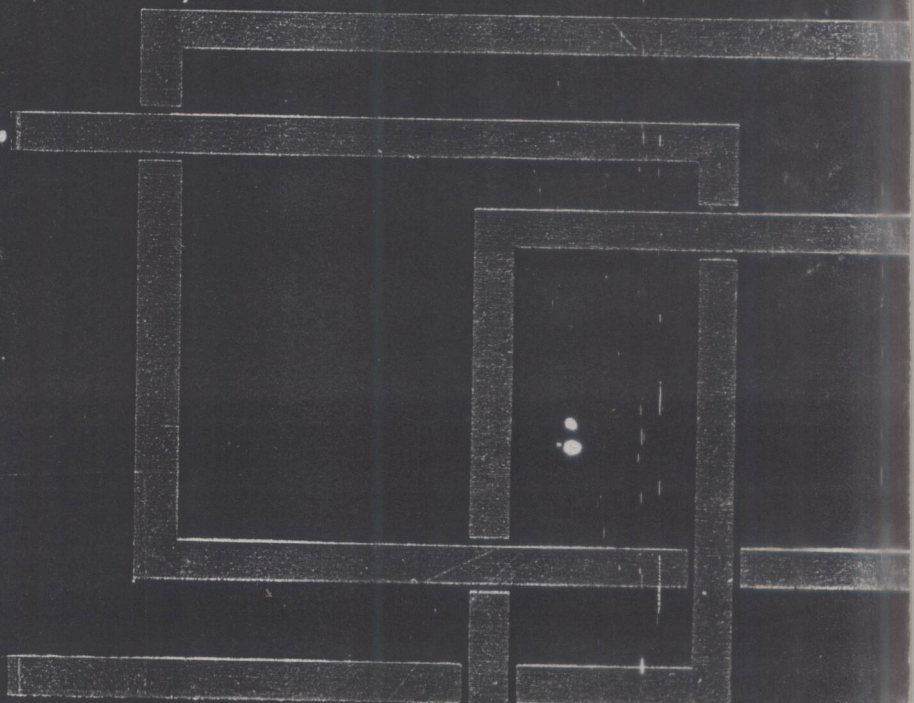

CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY SERIES

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About the Series

The Sage Series on Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology was created to present comparative studies on cross-cultural topics and interdisciplinary research. Inaugurated in 1975, the series is designed to satisfy a growing need to integrate research method and theory and to dissect issues in comparative analyses across cultures. The recent ascent of the cross-cultural method in social and behavioral science has been due largely to a recognition of methodological power inherent in the comparative perspective; a truly international approach to the study of behavioral, social, and cultural variables can be done only within such a methodological framework.

Each volume in the series presents substantive cross-cultural studies, considerations of the strengths, interrelationships, and weaknesses of its various methodologies, drawing upon work done in anthropology, political science, psychology, and sociology. Both individual researchers knowledgeable in more than one discipline and teams of specialists with differing disciplinary backgrounds have contributed to the series. While each individual volume may represent the integration of only a few disciplines, *the cumulative totality of the series reflects an effort to bridge gaps of methodology and conceptualization across the various disciplines and many cultures.*

The present book is easily the most "applied" or "practitioner-oriented" volume that has appeared in the series. Nearly all previous books in the series have been concerned either with the details and results of a specific research project or, as in several cases, with general methodological or problematic issues—issues that primarily attract the field researcher or the academician. Brislin and his coauthors have developed a most interesting training device designed to aid sojourners, executives, teachers, and others during the inevitable adjustment period they will face whenever they go to another culture or country. The heart

of the book is the "critical incident" technique. Each incident contains some common and perhaps universal characteristic of interpersonal interaction, with the actors in each incident being people from differing cultural backgrounds. What might be an appropriate interpretation of an incident in one culture could be quite inappropriate elsewhere. An interesting motivator in this technique is that people seem to be curious enough to want to explore what is proper and improper in each incident, and to discuss underlying reasons for the different interpretations.

The book will primarily be seen as a helpful aid to anyone who is interested in training and evaluating those who are preparing for "close encounters of the other-culture kind." However, it will also be welcomed by many academicians as a useful way in which to discuss certain social psychological principles, such as attribution processes or dimensions of interpersonal attraction. Others in the academic community may want to develop different ways to scale or to evaluate responses to the different incidents.

We are confident that anyone interested in improving intercultural interaction and understanding the subtle dynamics of interpersonal encounters will agree with us that this multipurpose book is a welcome addition to the series.

—Walter J. Lonner
Western Washington University

—John W. Berry
Queen's University

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I: Extensive Interaction with People from Other Cultures

1

INTRODUCTION

INFORMATION FOR THE PERSON ABOUT TO INTERACT EXTENSIVELY IN ANOTHER CULTURE

The purpose of the educational materials in this book is to assist people when they must adjust to life in another country, or to assist them when they are to interact extensively with people from other cultural backgrounds. The materials are designed to be helpful (1) no matter the country to which people are moving and (2) no matter their role in the other country. If used before extensive interaction with culturally different people in their own country, the assumption is that the materials will be useful (3) no matter the cultural group to which others belong.

The recommended method for preparing people to live in another country, or to interact extensively with members of another culture, is to examine 100 critical incidents and to analyze issues raised by the incidents. The cross-cultural encounters depicted in the incidents are typical of those faced by people living in other cultures, and they summarize common emotional experiences, communication difficulties, and challenges to pre-existing knowledge. The assumption is that if people read and analyze the 100 incidents, all drawn from the actual experiences of others who have moved across cultures, then they will be better prepared for their actual, upcoming intercultural interactions.

People typically have difficulties when moving across cultures. Suddenly, and with little warning, behaviors and attitudes that proved necessary for obtaining goals in their own culture are no longer useful. Further, familiar behaviors that marked a well-adjusted person in their own culture are seen as indicative of an ill-mannered person. Even with all the typical difficulties, however, most people look back upon their cross-cultural experiences as an enriching, challenging part of their lives. Many people make career changes as a result of extensive intercul-

(3) *Task effectiveness*, or the completion of one's work goals in another country. Foreign students want to obtain high school diplomas or a college degree. Overseas businesspeople want to establish trade agreements. Technical assistance advisers want to complete development projects. This aspect of cross-cultural success refers to the attainment of task-related goals, and these will differ from person to person. In some cases, this aspect will include the sharing of knowledge with hosts, as in the transfer of information for the maintenance of a successfully completed development project (Hawes & Kealey, 1981).

All three aspects should be kept in mind when thinking about the adjustment of sojourners. People may make seemingly adequate progress regarding one aspect but may have difficulties because of inattention to the other two aspects. For instance, people may think that they are making a good adjustment (aspect 1), but may be disliked by hosts (aspect 2). Strong-willed people may overcome obstacles and achieve their task-related goals (aspect 3), but at a cost to their physical and mental health (aspect 1). Professionals who work with sojourners (e.g., foreign student advisers, personnel officers in multinational organizations) should make sure that attention is paid to all three aspects. This attention is especially important for the future of cross-cultural interaction. Many times, sojourners who are overly concerned with one of the aspects (e.g., work to the exclusion of good interpersonal relations) do not receive appropriate feedback from hosts because of local norms demanding politeness and congeniality. However, the programs that brought the troublesome sojourners to the host country become jeopardized and there are few opportunities for the *next* wave of potential sojourners. Put another way, would-be sojourners pay for the sins of their predecessors. Many cultures have "war stories" about past sojourners that make it difficult, if not impossible, for today's sojourners to establish themselves and to have a chance at meeting the three-part criterion of success.

The Importance of Cross-Cultural Preparation

One major feature of the twentieth century is that increasing numbers of people, sometime during their lives, will have extensive interaction in cultures other than their own. Some people may receive their education in another country, thus taking on the role of foreign student. Other people may accept a job assignment in a multinational firm, thus taking on the role of overseas businessperson. Other people may work on development projects in various countries, thus taking on the role of

technical assistance adviser. Other common reasons for extensive interaction in other countries include missionary work, diplomacy, military assignments, immigration, and tourism. Extensive interaction with members of other cultures can take place in one's own country. Examples are the experiences of students going to integrated schools, neighbors in integrated housing projects, and workers in factories that do not discriminate in their hiring practices.

Difficulties inevitably arise whenever there is extensive cross-cultural interaction. People are socialized, in their own culture, to accept as "proper and good" a relatively narrow range of behaviors. Those behaviors not labeled as good are perceived as less desirable and, in extreme cases, as absolutely wrong. Further, others who engage in those less desirable behaviors are seen as backward, ignorant, or ill-mannered. In everyday words, people become accustomed to doing things (eating, courting, working, interacting with others) in certain ways, and the behaviors surrounding these activities are seen as proper. But when they interact with people from other cultures, those proper behaviors are not always forthcoming from the others. In addition, behaviors that people consider "improper" are practiced on a routine basis by those from other cultures. Common responses to this confrontation of past learning with present experiences are intense dislike of culturally different others (leading to prejudice), negative labels (stereotypes), and a refusal to interact with the others (discrimination).

The reactions of prejudice, stereotype formation, and discrimination occur even with people who voluntarily, and with the best intentions, move into cultures other than their own. People of good will who live in other cultures will inevitably encounter differences in behavior that are at odds with their expectations. But they must adjust their own behavior so as *not* to be discriminatory or judgmental. However, there are *so many* adjustments to be made: The other people make friends in different ways; they have different work and eating habits; they do not communicate their desires in familiar ways; and they come up with decisions in ways that boggle the mind. The demand to make *so many* adjustments is one reason for the phenomenon commonly called "culture shock." No one demand is overwhelming: People make adjustments every day to new pressures or to new information in their own culture. But the multiple demands, coming within a short period of time, cause frustration during extensive cross-cultural interaction. That frustration occasionally leads to negative feelings about members of other cultures, no matter how egalitarian the cross-cultural adjuster happens to be.

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