AMERICAN CULTURAL PATTERNS

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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AND
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REVISED EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

The need to improve cultural understanding led to the writing of the first edition of this volume some twenty years ago. Since then, research in cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication has advanced our knowledge and skills in the field which has enabled more people to become more effective in intercultural relationships. Their numbers, however, remain relatively few, even as the need for understanding other cultures and for developing intercultural competence grows, fueled by the realities of living in an interdependent world.

Intercultural communicators are discovering how deeply critical events facing the world today are rooted in culture. Each morning the newspaper reminds its readers of the American trade deficit with Japan. American and European economists alike speak of the Japanese culture that blocks access to its market. The evening news reports the latest move in world power politics that threatens the peace, but the essential agreement on the deterrences needed to maintain international stability reposes uneasily on conflicting cultural patterns of negotiation and decision making. The cauldron of violence in the Middle East continues to reflect cultural conflict between social and political groups, as does the rioting that erupts periodically in urban centers around the world. Advances in intercultural communication have at times stripped away layers of misunderstanding only to confront the cultural roots of economic, political, and sociological events. Many of the national and international tensions, including threats to peace, cannot be addressed at present levels of knowledge and skill.

Another reason for cultivating cultural understanding stems from the changed position of the United States in the world. The decline of American political and economic influence has affected the role of individual Americans abroad and changed foreigners' attitudes toward them. Americans no longer occupy the privileged position they enjoyed only twenty years ago. This altered role has made nearly obsolete the word *advisor,* used in the first edition to refer to Americans working abroad. The new role Americans play as partners, hosts, visitors, and competitors demands the reformulation of a number of central issues in the realm of cross-cultural understanding.

In this book, cross-cultural problems are seen as arising from differences in behavior, thinking, assumptions, and values between Americans and people from other countries and cultures with whom they associate. These cultural differences often produce misunderstandings and lead to ineffectiveness in face-to-face communication. A deeper understanding of the nature of cultural differences would increase the effectiveness of Americans in cross-cultural situations. But to reach this goal, Americans must first become more conscious and knowledgeable about how their own culture has conditioned their ways of thinking and planted within them the values and assumptions that govern their behavior.

Cultural self-awareness is not always easy since culture is internalized as patterns of thinking and behaving that are believed to be "natural"—simply the way things are. Awareness of their subjective culture is particularly difficult for Americans since they often interpret cultural factors as characteristics of individual personality. This view of internalized cultural patterns, disregarding their social origins, is a characteristic of American culture. It is not a universal point of view.

Since this book is written from the perspective of Americans, their culture serves as the frame of reference while other cultures enter the discussion as contrasts. Like world maps that place the map's originating country in the center, there is a degree of ethnocentrism in this focus on American culture, but it also serves an important purpose for cross-cultural analysis. We would like to stress, therefore, that this convention does not imply that American culture is perceived to be at the center of the mosaic of world cultures.

While our analysis of cross-cultural problems in communication naturally identifies obstacles to intercultural communication between Americans and members of other cultures and suggests ways in which communication could be improved, it is not our objective to prescribe behavior. Instead, we shall offer schematic descriptions of some important aspects of American culture and show their practical consequences for intercultural communication. Geared to operational needs

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of practitioners, the treatment deliberately skirts numerous issues concerning the meaning of culture, values, and other matters of primarily theoretical interest.

The objective of this second edition, as of the first, is to supply a perspective on some of the cross-cultural problems encountered by Americans visiting, working, or living with foreign associates. Whether the association occurs within the United States or abroad, this book presumes that those from other cultures direct their lives from different points of view and that Americans will gain a deeper understanding of their own culture by looking at it from contrasting cultural perspectives. We expect applications of this understanding will be made by practitioners working as trainers, technicians, students, academicians, businesspeople, or others who are visiting extensively or living in other cultural environments. It should also appeal to those concerned with American studies, who may wish to use cross-cultural analysis as a means of bringing American culture into sharper focus.

Finally, we hope this book will be valuable to people of other cultures who wish to gain a deeper understanding of American behavior. We have sought to avoid the ethnocentric distortions which limit the usefulness of most cultural self-studies to foreign readers.

In the first chapter, the cross-cultural problem is represented in a basic contrast between Western and non-Western societies with examples of specific cultural barriers met by Americans abroad. In chapter 2, American patterns of thinking and cultural contrasts are traced from their concrete inception in perception to their abstract conclusion in conceptualization. Chapter 3 explores the implications and limitations of the Whorf hypothesis and other factors in language use, including the role of nonverbal behavior in American and contrasting communication patterns. Chapters 4 through 7 present the core American assumptions and values organized into four areas: form of activity, form of social relations, perception of the world, and perception of self and the individual. Assumptions and values discussed in these chapters are the dominant values commonly associated with the American middle class. Clearly, these do not include all the significant values shared by large numbers of Americans. The relativity of assumptions and values is stressed throughout this description by contrasting dominant American cultural characteristics with those of other domestic and foreign cultures. The final chapter examines the implications of the analyses appearing in the previous chapters for the actual practice of intercultural communication by Americans.

Throughout the book we have tried as much as possible to employ only common concepts and to avoid using the language and concepts of social science that lack familiar connotations. We have, however,

adopted certain conventions of expression from the field of intercultural communication. Since the words *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* have similar definitions, we sometimes use them interchangeably, but we also apply them with more precise and separate meanings. *Cross-cultural* normally refers to any *comparison* of cultural differences (e.g., a cross-cultural study of values in the U.S. and Japan) or to situations in which such differences exist (e.g., a cross-cultural teaching situation). The word *intercultural* is usually added to *communication* or *relations* and refers to the actual *interaction* between people of different cultures. For example, in a cross-cultural work environment, Americans and foreigners necessarily engage in intercultural communication. We avoid using *international* since the word refers to a wide range of political and economic affairs that may be neither culturally comparative nor interactive. Despite avoidance of the word, we hope that the book's cross-cultural perspective will be recognized as a necessary complement to international studies.

The term *American* is used here as a short form of "citizen of the United States of America." While many people prefer *North American,* the authors believe that to include sovereign Canadians in the same grouping as Americans is misleading, despite many similarities between the populations of the two countries. It is even more misleading when you consider the fact that Mexico is also part of North America. The use of the word *American* to refer to the people of the United States has a long historical precedent, and we have chosen to accept it for our purposes here.

American culture refers to the dominant patterns of thinking and behaving of mainstream Americans, composed primarily, but not exclusively, of members of the white, male middle class. When discussing other cultures represented in American society, we will use the term *ethnic subcultures.* This distinction is artificial since American mainstream and ethnic subcultures constantly intermingle, reciprocally influencing each other. When discussing the interaction of ethnic minorities, we shall substitute *multicultural* for *cross-cultural* and *interethnic* for *intercultural.*

Additional terms we shall use in specific ways include the following: *sojourner* is anyone (in this case, an American) who travels abroad for a specific purpose or resides temporarily in a foreign country. The term *abroad* is used generically to mean "outside the U.S.A." Foreigners with whom Americans interact are called *associates* or *coworkers* unless a more specific label like *host* or *student* is appropriate. Since the meaning of *foreigners* can sometimes be ambiguous, *host country nationals* will occasionally be used to refer to people whom Americans encounter abroad.

The original edition of this book incorporated the work of Florence R. Kluckhohn without adopting her complete system of theoretical concepts. This edition still strongly reflects the influence of Dr. Kluckhohn's work. While care has been taken to represent Dr. Kluckhohn's ideas accurately, the authors assume responsibility for any differences in interpretation which may appear. The work of George M. Foster and Robin M. Williams, Jr. is also integrated into this analysis of American culture.

In addition to the published material referenced throughout the text, some unpublished sources have been used. These include interviews with military advisors in Laos, Thailand, and Latin America, United States Agency for International Development technicians, Peace Corps volunteers, medical missionaries, and hundreds of foreign and American students in international study programs. These sources have been augmented by the writers' own observations. The senior author, Edward Stewart, has for years served as a consultant to and conducted research for businesses in the United States, Japan, and Europe and has worked with government agencies in the U.S. and abroad that regulate technology. The other author, Milton Bennett, is an intercultural trainer, educator, and researcher whose work includes the preparation and debriefing of Americans working, traveling, and studying worldwide.

Florence Kluckhohn, George Foster, and Robin Williams, Jr. provided substantive critiques of an original draft of the first edition, setting the form persisting through this revision. The writers are indebted to them for their incisive, kind, and patient reviews. We remain grateful to David Hoopes, who has provided constant encouragement in his insightful editing of both editions of this book.

CONTENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE CROSS-CULTURAL PROBLEM

Lasting success in working or living with people from another culture ultimately rests on good human relations. Sometimes the relationship is specialized, as with an engineer doing business with other engineers. Their technical background and purposes may create a professional bond that allows them to establish successful temporary and restricted business relationships during a brief visit. Other guests in a foreign environment may depend on the tolerance of their hosts, simply "being themselves" and making no effort to accommodate to cultural differences. The short-term success of these kinds of professional or host-guest relationships sometimes leads people to discount the importance of cultural differences in cross-cultural interaction. But this sort of "success" cannot be sustained over time. Even technicians must eventually discard the role of expert and develop empathy for coworkers in the cross-cultural setting.

Until recently, little attention has been given to the effect of cultural differences or sociocultural factors on interpersonal relations. Even today the view that these factors constitute the critical ingredient of cross-cultural interaction is not widely held among people involved in international affairs. And outside the field of intercultural communication, the subject is still largely neglected by scholars. The most ambitious attempt to correct this deficiency is Richard Brislin's *Cross-cultural Encounters* (1981). In this book Brislin summarizes the existing research on cross-cultural interpersonal relations and demonstrates the complexity of the subject, helping to

explain why practitioners have avoided it and why researchers have sought simple solutions based on a unified view of culture.

In practice, confusion is created by two basic aspects of culture. One aspect is *subjective culture*—the psychological features of culture, including assumptions, values, and patterns of thinking. The other is *objective culture*—the institutions and artifacts of a culture, such as its economic system, social customs, political structures and processes, arts, crafts, and literature. Objective culture can be treated as an externalization of subjective culture which usually becomes reified; that is, those institutions which are properly seen as extensions of human activity attain an independent status as external entities. They seem to exist "out there," and their ongoing human origins are forgotten.

In traditional universities the study of objective culture is well established in departments of social sciences and humanities. Perhaps this is because institutions and other external artifacts of behavior are more accessible to examination. Subjective culture is usually treated as an unconscious process influencing perception, thinking, and memory or as personal knowledge which is inaccessible to trainers or educators. In universities this aspect of culture is a newcomer and a minor thread in sociology, social psychology, and communication. Subjective culture becomes a major subject only in cultural anthropology. Although anthropologists typically make cross-cultural comparisons, they much more rarely investigate the practical aspects of intercultural communication. Instead, their major interest is in collecting information about the institutions of objective culture. While this kind of information provides useful background, it does not effectively prepare sojourners for the intercultural experience. Yet, it is precisely this information about objective culture which constitutes most of the cultural components of the majority of orientation programs for persons going abroad. The problem, as we see it, is to conceptualize subjective culture in such a way that it can be more effectively incorporated into preparing sojourners for living and working abroad. To that end, we will analyze the basic elements of culture as interpersonal dimensions relevant to cross-cultural cooperation.

Aspects of Cross-Cultural Interactions

For most people, including Americans, the distinguishing mark of cross-cultural interaction is the disappearance of the familiar guideposts that allow them to act without thinking in their own culture. Routine matters become problems that require planning or conscious decisions. They may not know when to shake hands, nod their heads, ask a question, express an opinion, or maintain silence. They may have to question the

effectiveness of their techniques for giving advice and may need to search for proper channels of communication.

Faced with these cross-cultural uncertainties, people tend to impose their own perspectives in an effort to dispel the ambiguity created by the unusual behavior of host country nationals. They are unlikely to suspend judgment about differences in behavior because they assume unconsciously that their own ways are normal, natural, and right. Those of the other culture, therefore, must be abnormal, unnatural, and wrong. This presumption of superiority of one's own culture is, of course, characteristic not only of Americans but of most peoples of the world.

Cross-cultural ambiguity and reactions to it often become most prominent for the American in the world of work. In the foreign setting

> he sees what looks like familiar bureaucratic structures and technological systems, but the way they actually function is confusing. He meets people with professional training similar to his own but who do not always act in their work role as expected—yet he depends on them for getting the job done. Frustration becomes part of his everyday language if he finds no way to achieve fuller understandings of why things which look alike do not perform as they are supposed to (Useem, Useem, and Donoghue 1963, 179).

This problem may become especially acute when individuals work with foreigners in the context of a familiar organization since the environment provides them with little if any incentive to recognize the cultural biases of their behavior or to question the objectivity of their actions. An understanding of the biases and underlying predispositions of their particular culture should aid Americans in ridding themselves of the belief that their own assumptions and values should be the norm for all peoples. This change in attitude does not mean that Americans should discard their own culture (even if it were possible for them to do so) or even that they should value it less highly, but it should prepare them to perceive both their own behavior and that of coworkers more objectively.

Americans frequently go abroad in the role of consultant and may, therefore, be less directly involved in actual work than when they were at home. Thus, their goals abroad are usually less tangible than those they have at home. If work and social position are not clearly structured, individuals are thrown back upon their own resources in making decisions, evaluating situations, and pursuing courses of action. Performance on the job may be adversely affected when routine matters become major problems and cultural differences are intensified. Consultants may also be deprived of the social support available when working within a familiar

organization, and they may be either isolated or else absorbed into a foreign social structure. Customary services and the advice or moral support provided by colleagues will also normally be missing.

Many Americans find when they arrive abroad that their work assumes a character quite different from what they were led to expect. A training problem takes on a new dimension when the sojourner discovers that the trainees, in addition to speaking only their native language, are illiterate. Sometimes a health program does not get off the ground because people do not have the concept of germs and are therefore unable to understand preventive health measures. Most upsetting of all, their culture provides an explanation of disease and health incompatible with Western scientific discoveries. In short, what is aptly labeled "training," "education," or "health" in the United States may acquire entirely different characteristics abroad.

A particularly disturbing problem faced by consultants may be the intransigence of local officials and government which makes the Americans' job one of persuading and influencing. They may be compelled to accept, perhaps bitterly, the frustration of their objectives, and when deprived of concrete achievements, Americans may experience feelings of failure. These feelings are often compounded by the realization that their services are not wanted. (This has been particularly true of the military advisors and, to a lesser degree, of Peace Corps volunteers.) They are accepted as a necessary evil or, at best, a neutral presence. They bring with them material resources and prestige, but their advice is not always welcomed.

American students, educators, and researchers face problems in some ways similar to those encountered by consultants, business executives, and other professionals living abroad. Ambitious educational goals that were set in the home environment may be out of reach in a foreign country. Researchers may find data that "should" be readily available concealed by layers of bureaucracy, and they may discover that their methods of inquiry, such as interviews or questionnaires, are inappropriate or ineffective. Students who expected that their host families would simply be providing sleeping quarters may be surprised at the intensity of cross-cultural adjustment that is demanded of them. Teachers are likely to encounter radically different attitudes toward learning and classroom behavior. The disappearance of familiar guideposts acts on academics as it does on others, provoking frustration and perhaps the assumption that American approaches to education are superior in all ways. In addition students and others engaged in educational exchange may feel that the unexpected problems have spoiled the pleasures anticipated in going abroad.

Teachers and visiting scholars abroad are in a position similar to that of other workers in seemingly familiar organizations. They may resist the

recognition of cultural differences in favor of maintaining a semblance of their familiar roles—roles that encourage equality and an emphasis on the give-and-take that prevails in the American classroom. Yet, teachers will probably find, especially outside of Europe, that their students behave quite formally, are very deferential to the teacher and reluctant to participate in classroom discussion, and are inclined to rote learning. American educators may judge this behavior as indicative of a personal failing on their own or their students' part, rather than seeing it as a culturally different pattern.

Many, if not most, of the problems faced by Americans abroad are encountered in reverse by foreign students and scholars coming to the United States. American instructors are likely to demand "appropriate" behavior from these students and to judge aberrations as a failure to adapt. Ironically, in an attempt to adapt to American classroom patterns, foreign students sometimes overreact to the participatory atmosphere, monopolizing too much time and speaking dogmatically. This may appear as arrogant and domineering to the instructor, fueling further negative evaluation. Foreign students in the U.S., like American students abroad, certainly must learn to communicate effectively with the host country nationals and to cope with the local educational system. However, Americans with a knowledge of their own culture and an appreciation for cultural diversity can help foreign students immensely by openly recognizing their differing cultures and by explaining American patterns in culturally comparative terms.

Americans abroad readily observe and describe cross-cultural differences of language, customs and preferences. The fact that these kinds of differences may be easily perceived often obscures the deeply imbedded but more profound disparities in concepts of the world and human experience and in patterns of thought and modes of action, all of which affect the person-to-person interaction of Americans and their hosts. Subtle differences in the behavior, thoughts, and emotions of associates may not always be perceived by Americans, but as they cumulate they require interpretation, and the explanation most likely to occur to Americans is that their associates have a bias against them. In other words, the Americans may feel they are being stereotyped.

Contributing to this reaction and sometimes giving it substance is the fact that others do indeed have stereotypes of Americans, perhaps originating from Americans known previously or from hearsay, but more probably emerging from exposure to American films and television. Aspects of the stereotype may run counter to the American's emotional and cultural frames of reference. For instance, the stereotype of "rich American" may be perceived by an individual American as neither an accurate nor desirable label. Americans may be regarded as representa-

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