Cultural Orientation

AN APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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"What is true is that which appears clearly and distinctly to the mind—not that which is confirmed by observation or by experimental testing of hypotheses."

In memory of

Professor Edmund S. Glenn

friend, gentleman, scholar,
and the epitome of an effective
intercultural communicator.

Preface

Most intercultural communication texts either tell you *about* a culture or cultures, or give you explicit instructions on how to adapt to a specific culture. The readers may go to the culture thinking that they know how to behave because they have learned some of the verbal and/or nonverbal languages used there. This surface knowledge will give them the erroneous feeling of being able to communicate (understand and be understood) with their hosts. Not knowing that similar behaviors may stem from different beliefs (or different behaviors from similar beliefs) causes many intercultural problems. How the beliefs of one culture differ from those of another, and, more importantly, how these belief systems are translated into communicative behaviors are essential to understanding intercultural communication.

Understanding the languages of a culture, both verbal and nonverbal, is extremely important to effective intercultural communication. However, the ease with which one grasps a surface knowledge of a verbal code, and the tendencies we all have for interpreting nonverbal codes according to our own cultural dictionary, make it essential that we understand the interplay between culture and language. Certainly we are interested in knowing the communication codes of a culture so we can communicate fluently. However, of greater importance is an understanding of the cognitive structures which generate the communicative behaviors of a culture. Two cultures may appear to be "saying" the same thing, but because of the differences in their cognitive orientations they may be saying something very different.

The cognitive orientation of a culture is reflected in the interaction between the cognitive structures of its members and their belief and disbelief systems. Thus, a basic question to be answered in this text is: How can we know

what a culture's cognitive structures and processes are and what the belief systems are upon which they act? The reader should not expect to be given an equation or algorithm by which he or she can translate beliefs into behaviors. Communication is much too complex for that. What they will be given is an awareness of, and a way of viewing, the differences in the cognitive structures of different cultures. This is the purpose of the Cultural Orientation Model, and it will help one understand intercultural communication. To become a competent intercultural communicator, one must develop one's own communication strategies.

This text does not concentrate on the obvious differences between cultures; rather, it probes for the reasons behind both the obvious and the hidden differences. These reasons are found in the cognitive orientation of a culture and its belief and disbelief systems. Being able to understand these cultural differences and their implications for effective communication gives one an opportunity to communicate more effectively with other cultures. If one can determine the underlying cultural perspective of the communicator from the host culture (and knows one's own), then strategies can be developed to effect authentic communication by understanding each other's communicative behavior and value structures.

A schema is developed that integrates theory with practicality to form a series of constructs that will aid a person in the understanding of another culture and enable him or her to communicate in that culture more effectively. The approach is culture-general with sufficient applications to non-U.S. cultures to make it applicable to the study of any specific culture. Conceptually, it is based on the work of Edmund Glenn, with help from Geert Hofstede, Milton Rokeach, and George Kelly, all within the framework of the author's own systems theory.

This book is biased in favor of theory. It is based on the author's 25 years of university teaching of all aspects of human communication, and his work in the last ten years in Costa Rica, Panamá, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. This has etched on his mind the futility of ethnocentrism and the need to inject some communication theory into the study of intercultural communication. It is hoped that this book will do the same to you.

Many of the quotes in this book are from pre-feminist times. They have not been changed so you can see the cultural change that has taken place in the U.S. in the last 20 years.

There are many people who must be thanked for their help in conceptualizing this book. Foremost are Drs. E. Payson Hall of Radford University, Francisco Escobar of the University of Costa Rica, Greville Rumble of the Open University of England, and Luis González of the University of Panamá. Others include the author's Costa Rican family, the Sanchez: papa Sanchez, mama Rosa, Willie, and Mario; and the Jiménez family, especially Ginnette Sibaja and Cynthia Espinoza.

G.A.B.

Introduction

"Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means" Umberto Eco (1983), *The Name of the Rose*, p. 380.

Do not plan to read this book and be "filled" with its knowledge. The only truths you will find herein are the ones you find by challenging its perspective in light of your own experiences. Unless you become involved with the ideas presented here, they will have no meaning and will leave you poorer than when you came, for you will have spent your time searching for the tree of knowledge rather than cultivating the seeds of truth you have gleaned from your own human experiences. To extend the metaphor, this book should be used as fertilizer to help you grow a better harvest of experiences in intercultural communication.

James Downs (1971) highlighted one of the premises of this book when he said, "one of the greatest stumbling blocks to understanding other peoples within or without a particular culture is the tendency to judge others' behavior by our own standards" (p. 15). As you progress through this book, you will see how many things point to the difficulty of breaking out of our ethnocentric chains. But you cannot do this by just reading and accepting or rejecting what the author has said. You must challenge each point, dialogue about it with your professor, classmates, friends, and acquaintances from cultures other than your own. For this reason the exercises at the end of each chapter are extremely important. They will help you begin to understand other cultures. You will be given some basic human communication constructs with which you can analyze intercultural communication events. This is not an easy task, especially if you are not aware of the cultural constraints within which you must work. You will be given several ways of looking at culture to help you determine how those cultural constraints work and why a cultural orientation is necessary for understanding intercultural communication.

Smith (1979) presents a basic problem of intercultural communication when he writes, "Again and again intercultural communication runs into that hornet's nest, the classification of cultures. When people of one group communicate with people of another group, they need to know what those others are like. To describe and characterize them is to classify them" (p. 1). Stereotypes! Some are good, but most are bad, because we seldom get beyond them in our communication with the stereotyped.

If, however, we know "the relevant features of different groups, and . . . how such features generally relate to one another, (we) may be able to predict the results when the groups interact" (p. 1). The key here is "relevant features." For example, if we take color of skin, social status, or type of sex organ as the relevant features and accept no others, then we have created a stereotype that can interfere with effective communication. On the other hand, each of these may be used as a feature that will allow us to engage in communication processes that will help us develop the knowledge about the other person required for effective human bonding.

The features we will focus on in this text are cognitive as opposed to anatomical or physical. If we can develop a system by which we can understand how the other person approaches life, and we accept the differences and similarities between us, perhaps we can improve our intercultural communication. This should hold true on all levels of communication, from that between individuals to that between nations. But alas, what are the relevant features of a culture, and how shall we expose them once we have discovered what they are?

A structure has been developed for social science research which differentiates between external and internal analyses of systems. These two perspectives are referred to as the *etic* and *emic* approach to cultural analysis. Hall (1986) says that, "each perspective embraces a separate epistemological view point. . . . It is this recognition—of the scientist as an external observer and universal (in intent) sense-maker, and of the behaving human as an internal observer and particular sense-maker—that is the source of Pike's etic-emic distinction" (p. 129). Pike (1966) had first developed this schema in 1954, and it has found its way into nearly all aspects of social science research today.

The etic approach describes cultures from outside and is concerned with cultural comparisons. It is an objective approach with preconceived categories of behaviors (Jones, 1979). The emic approach describes cultures from within and is concerned with descriptions of individual cultures. It is also an objective approach wherein the categories of behavior are allowed to emerge from the collected data (Harris, 1979). In both approaches the objectivity of the observation is the ideal scenario. In reality, both approaches are just as likely to be subjective. Using both the etic and the emic approaches will help us develop a model to understand similarities and differences among cultures.

It is assumed that the reader has a grasp of the basic concepts of human communication. In the first three chapters of the book, we will detail the

specific systems constructs that will be used to build an understanding of intercultural communication throughout this book. These constructs should be looked upon as building blocks for the theory being presented in the rest of the text. The assumptions about human communication should prepare the reader psychologically to understand the nature of human communication as the author does and so make similar abstractions as the information is presented.

Chapter 1 defines what is meant by human communication in terms of the systems perspective and builds the systems theoretic structures within which we will consider intercultural communication. Chapter 2 presents basic information on verbal and nonverbal codes and shows how they interact with culture. Chapter 3 presents the three dimensions within which human communication is constrained (the environment and boundaries of the human communication system).* All communication takes place somewhere in space and time; thus, the situation puts major constraints on the communication that can take place. These constraints are discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 details the personal constructs one brings to any communication event, i.e., one's cognitive orientation, including its structure and processes along with its belief and disbelief systems.

In Chapter 6 the concept of culture is reviewed and the Cultural Orientation Model is presented, showing the constraints that one's culture puts on understanding intercultural communication. We then build in Chapter 7 the basis for the beliefs and value structures that underlie our communicative behavior. This is followed by chapters on each of the four universal belief systems developed by Hofstede: Chapter 8 considers the communicative implications of Power Distance, Chapter 9 does the same for Uncertainty Avoidance, Chapter 10 for Individualism, and Chapter 11 for Masculinity.

Chapter 12 presents a model for first culture enculturation and speaks to the importance of being culturally literate. Chapter 13 looks at U.S. culture to see what one must know to be culturally literate, and it develops the constructs one can use to become literate in any culture. Chapter 14 presents a model for second culture acculturation and developing literacy in that culture. In Chapter 15 we look at the processes by which one can develop an understanding of another culture. Finally, in Chapter 16 we sum up the constructs we need to understand intercultural communication and present some ideas on the types of communication strategies that are applicable to intercultural communication.

Each chapter begins with an intercultural experience that is pertinent to the subject matter of that chapter. Most of these examples come from the author's experiences in Costa Rica. In fact, Costa Rica serves as the "other

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*The material in the first three chapters relies heavily on the material presented in the author's book *Human Communication Systems*, 2nd ed. (Boston: American Press, 1989) and is presented here by permission of the author.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE
Human Communication: By Definition

When people meet they do so to communicate, but how would you define human communication? What is it? I'm sure you would know it if you saw it, but is it really as prevalent as we think it is? Is it basically a process that one can explicate and visualize, with actions that must be taken and rules that must be followed, or must it have an effect that can be measured so that when certain things have happened, we can say that human communication has occurred? Or perhaps it is an undefinable interchange of cognitive energy that functions as a vehicle for social intercourse and creates and/or maintains interpersonal relationships. Let's look at an example.

In the United States, the telephone number of the hotel and your room number are usually displayed on the telephone (or thereabouts) in your hotel room. This is not the case in Costa Rica, for example. For several years telephones were installed by a union that happened to be run by the Communist Party. When they installed a telephone in an *apartotel*, or hotel, they would put a sticker on it bearing the telephone number of the Communist Party's headquarters. A young North American female, when visiting Costa Rica for the first time, called several of her newly made friends and gave them this number, thinking it was that of the *apartotel* where she was staying. After a couple of days she found out why no one was calling her, but the Communist Party is probably still wondering why it was taking her calls!

With the telephone number on the telephone there was intent to communicate, but to whom and for what purpose? When I have finished writing this book, and you have finished reading it, has communication occurred? Or can we forget about the *process* and say that human communication occurs when one person affects another cognitively or physically? For example, is a child proof of communication between its parents? Or can we forget about the

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effects and look at communication as the ingredient in social intercourse whose *function* is to precipitate relationships, build organizations, and create hierarchies? For example, friends, the local church, and governments.

When human communication is studied from each of these perspectives, the focus is necessarily different and leads to different conclusions about the nature of human communication. Each focus affects the definitions we give to effective communication, competence, and the term communication itself. It is the opinion of this author that human communication should be studied and understood within a context that allows all three of the above approaches to be used, depending upon the focus of the inquiry. Such a context is provided by General Systems (Borden, 1985a).

A SYSTEMS APPROACH

The basic model of the human communication process is a linear one in which the fact that communication is an ongoing process is indicated by the inclusion of a feedback loop. Basically, the process is this: The communicator sends a communiqué to a communicatee who responds by returning a communiqué to the communicator. The linear model hides the fact that both the communicator and the communicatee are sending and receiving communiqués simultaneously. The reader should be familiar with such concepts as feedback, noise, source, semantic encoder, codes, message, signal, transmitter, receptors, semantic decoder, destination, and intent.

Any message may be put into several different codes; in fact, the signal transmitted in almost every communication situation is a composite of several codes, all of which should elaborate the message coded into the signal. When they do not, e.g., when you are telling someone that you love them but your nonverbals are saying "I couldn't care less," there is noise in the system, and your communication effectiveness is diminished. Communication is, at best, approximate. The result of unintelligible, unintended, or misinterpreted signals may be a serious problem for either the communicator, the communicatee, or both, as it was in the opening example!

The fact that messages and meanings are in the mind and must be encoded into and decoded from a signal for communication to occur is an important distinction, for we have long been calling that which we speak or write "the message." But that which we speak or write is a *signal* into which a communicator has coded one or more messages and from which a communicatee may also decode a number of messages. Our libraries are full of signals (books) which, when read, deliver slightly different messages to each of their readers. Human communication is a cognitive process.

The process definition of human communication is perhaps more obvious in intercultural communication when one is learning a second language. In the beginning this is a process in which we create and transmit signals that are decoded by our host, teacher, or friend and corrected by this person, who

gives us feedback by telling us what is a more precise or acceptable signal for the message we wanted to convey. Problems usually occur when one is using literal translations from one language to the other. For example, in Costa Rica if you do not hear or understand what someone has just said, you do not say *"¿qué?"* (what), as I had the habit of doing, but *"¿cómo?"* (how). After being corrected by everyone, I finally realized that you must use the cultural norms if you want to be understood.

If one focuses primarily on the effects of human communication, one is looking at the responses produced by this process and gives little attention to the process itself. The effects model was made popular in the late 1940s by Harold Lasswell in his famous *Who* says *What*, in what *Channel*, to *Whom*, with what *Effect*. With the advent of various mass media, one had to take into account the channel through which the signal was being sent. Focusing on the effects aspect of human communication often leads to misperceptions and thus, misunderstanding of the intended message.

Illustrations of this focus are abundant in U.S. foreign policy statements. For example, the United States is more results oriented and Latin Americans are more process oriented. When the presidents of the five Central American countries signed the Arias Peace Plan in 1987, the U.S. State Department commented that they had signed the agreement but there was no peace. The Central Americans were looking forward to a process that would bring about peace, while the United States was looking at the agreement as a statement of an accomplishment. Product vs. process is a serious difference in cultural orientation.

Rather than asking how communication occurs (process) or what response it evoked from the audience (effects), one might ask what function it has in the ongoing activities of life. What is the importance of communication to one's livelihood? What role does it play in being human? In the broadest sense, the functional approach to human communication focuses on the role it plays in defining humanity. This approach transcends both the process model and the effects model to look at the whole picture, with communication being only one of the variables. It relies on both of the other models to help explain how it functions, but the focus is on communication itself. It asks, What is the role, or function, of communication in the process of developing social systems? An appeal to General Systems Theory can help us ascertain this function.

General Systems Theory

Basic systems theory is concerned with: 1) wholeness—a system is composed of two or more interrelated subsystems; 2) sharing—the subsystems are bonded together through the subparts which they share; 3) synergy—the output of a system is greater than or different from the sum of its subsystems' outputs; 4) entropy—without an input of energy, an open system will "run down," i.e., become disorganized and unable to function efficiently; 5) self-