

《Treatise》

Education for Cross-cultural Understanding (2)

Intercultural Communication Issues & Barriers

Shoji Mitarai & Helena Kelava

Abstract

The authors supplied a perspective on some of the intercultural communication issues encountered by educators, business persons and international students in an intercultural milieu at home and abroad. A critical examination of obstacles to intercultural communication and how to increase intercultural understanding is suggested.

Introduction

The issue of interacting across cultures holds the key to human survival itself. No matter how the reader may define it, we have already become one single unit world. The coming of the single world culture has dangers as well as potentials. It should liberate mankind from the course of meaningless conflicts and misunderstandings.

Eibesfeldt's findings indicate that "smiling, crying, seeking automatism, and a number of reflects" as universals. The universal needs have cultural variations as to the type and amount required and do differ in this regard.

Normally, the method used to improve chances for successful intercultural communication and interchange is to gather information on the customs of the other and a smattering of the language. A better approach is to learn the history, society, art and literature and language of the country. But at the same time, it is essential, as cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead urged that to sensitize persons to the kind of things that need to be taken into account

instead of developing behavior, attitude stereotypes, mainly because of the individual differences in each encounter and the rapid changes that occur in a culture pattern. According to an intercultural communication researcher, LaRay Barna, one quick way to reach an improved state of awareness and sensitivity to what might go wrong is explore variables in the communication process which create cultural conflicts and barriers.⁽²⁾

While this article deals with: 1) some of the variables of the intercultural communication process itself; and 2) examines critical areas and barriers—which often impede freer intercultural interchange, it is also intended to enhance reader's own intercultural communication skills, perspectives, and reciprocal understanding.

Successful participation in intercultural interaction requires us to be familiar with culture's influence on verbal interaction. It also requires that we recognize and have knowledge of the influence culture has on nonverbal interaction as well. Nonverbal behaviors constitute messages to which people attach meaning just as verbal behaviors. But a main issue is nonverbal behavior and message are largely unconscious.

Before exploring critical barriers, it is vital to consider the relationship between culture and communication. The concept of culture present some difficulties in the discussion of intercultural communication.

In the classic anthropological sense, culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, customs, experience, meanings, values, beliefs, attitudes, religions, concept of self, the universe, self-universe relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relationships, and time concepts learned and shared by a large group of people in the course of generations. Culture manifests itself both in patters of language and thought and in forms of activity and behavior. These patterns—most of which are invisible and unrecognizable—become models for common adaptive activity and behavior, which enable people to live in a society.

Lack of Comprehension of Nonverbal Aspects of Communication

The first critical barrier is *the lack of comprehension of nonverbal aspects of communication*—nonverbal signs, gestures, signs, and sign languages. Edward T. Hall, a pioneer of intercultural communication once metaphorically treated Americans—“Why are we ugly Americans?” in his classic book *The Silent Language*. But a fare warning must be given here because what Hall indicates “Ugly something” is not just restricted to Americans. It can also be applied to other nationals. On the back cover of his book, he spells out the following comments:

Our manners and behavior often speak more plainly than words. Tradition, taboo, environment, habits and customs, which are powerful influence on character and personality, vary greatly from country to country. Most Americans, however, are not only totally ignorant of what is expected in other countries, but equally ignorant of what they are communicating to other people by their own national behavior. ⁽³⁾

Hall also explains the reason why Sir Arthur Conan Doyle made a success with his creation, a famous detective Sherlock Holmes. It is largely attributed to the fact that Holmes knew how to make the most of non-verbal communication and extracted the maximum from what he observed. Put it differently, Holmes was a great effective non-verbal message reader.

Concept of Time

“Time” which includes intervals and silence—talks more than words. The role of silence plays in Japan is so great that people from abroad are often perplexed by it. There is a proverb that goes “Silence is virtue.” It is during silent meaningful intervals that the famous “*haragei*” (silent belly art form) –

sensing of another's thoughts and feelings goes on. Being too quick to interpret a silent can get a non-Japanese into trouble. Besides being a time of feeling out, silence could show a range of things—from comfort and discomfort, from disagreement to pure lack of understanding. So it is necessary to be patient through these periods and try to discern first if people have completely understand what you have said.

To understand the Japanese version of the word “No” can be another pitfall—which never be verbalized. Thus, it is important to read the cues. The hissing sound —sucking in the air through the teeth means difficulty. Unless you pay attention to these cues, you will miss several crucial steps and go home congratulating yourself on a deal that will never be summated.

It is a hard task to correctly comprehend the unspoken codes of the other culture which are further from awareness—such as the use of time and subtle signs of formality and informality, and spatial relationships. The lack of understanding of clear nonverbal signs, and such symbols as gestures, postures is also a barrier.

Body Language and Kinesics

Since 1970s'a new exciting science called “body language” has been uncovered and explored. And the scientific study of body language has been labled as “kinesics.” Both body language and kinesics are based on the behavioral patterns of nonverval communication. However, kinesics is new as a science.

Clinical studies have found the extent to which body language can contradict verbal communication. A classic example is the young woman who told her psychiatrist that she loved her boy friend very much while nodding her head from side to side in subconsecious denial. A new signal comes from the unconscious. In a poker game if the player is in the “know” when his opponent's pupils widen. And the player can be certain that his opponent is

holding a good hand or card.

To understand this type of unspoken body language, kinesics experts need to take into consideration cultural differences and environmental differences. The average person, unschooled in cultural nuances of body language, often misinterprets what he or she sees.

Gestures

Research in nonverbal communication indicates that patterns of gesture can tell us about a great deal of ourselves and others. Outsiders who observe a culture different from their own can often spot behavioral differences—which those engaged in the behaviors are not conscious of. Some observational studies help us to get outside ourselves and draw our attention to details we might otherwise not realize or not notice.^(7&8)

Each Culture Has its Own Set of Gestures

Each culture has its own set of gestures and hand signals.

In Japan, gestures, are not as overt or as large as in the West. The axis of a gesture is more likely to be at the wrist than at the elbow or shoulder. It is thought that a mature person should have a subdued style. Desmond Morris, a zoologist and behavioral scientist, has done his field work on gestures by traveling more than 90 countries in the world.

In the introduction section in his book *Body Talk*, Morris specifies that as we move around the world we cannot help noticing that certain familiar gestures disappear and other strange ones take their place. It is too easy to make mistakes, as every seasoned traveler will have discovered. What is good or polite in one region or culture is obscene and strange in another. What is friendly in one region is hostile or antagonistic in another. So a guide and orientations are needed. Some gestures do not suffer from these local or cultural variations. They appear to be universal, and it makes us feel at home even when we are on the other side of the globe. For instance, a smile is smile,

the world over. A frown is frown, a stare is a stare. We all laugh, but in some places a loud laugh is considered rude. So even with our most basic signals it helps us understand the regional rules of conduct. ⁽¹²⁾

A Gesture in Any Action Sends Visual Signals

According to Morris, a gesture is any action that sends a visual signal to an onlooker or an outsider. To become a gesture, an act must be seen and observed by someone else and must communicate some piece of information to them. It has to do this either because the gesturer sets out to send a signal—as when he waves his hand—or it can do it only incidentally—as when he sneezes. The hand-wave is a Primary Gesture, because it has no other existence or function. It is a piece of communication from the start to finish. The sneeze, by contrast, is a secondary, or Incidental Gesture. Its main function is mechanical and is concerned over the sneezer's the sneezer's personal breathing problem. In its secondary role, however, it cannot help but transmit a message to his companions, warning them that he may have caught a cold.

People have tendency to limit their use of the word 'gesture' to the primary form—the wand-wave type—but this misses an important point.

What Matters with Gestures

What matters with gestures is not what signals we think we are sending out, but what signals are being received. The observers of our acts will make no distinction between our intentional Primary Gestures, and our unintentional incidental ones. In some ways, our Intentional Gestures are more illuminating of the two, if only the fact that we do not think of them as a gestures, and thus do no censor and manipulate them so strictly.

This is why it is preferable to use the term 'gesture' in its wider meaning as an observed action.

A conventional way of distinguish between Incidental and Primary Gestures is to ask a question—like what do not wave, wink, or point when we

are by ourselves; not, that is, unless we have reached the unusual condition of talking animatedly to ourselves.⁽¹⁰⁾

Two Kinds of Gestures

There are also two kinds of gestures. First, there are the hand movements that emphasize the words—the posture of the hand as it beats the air will tell you something about the mood of the person. Then there are the symbolic gestures or emblematic gestures that have a meaning or provide a piece of information. With the case of the thumbs up or the raised middle finger, the gestures are taking the place of verbal communication. They're not ancient symbols but cultural gestures that vary from country to country. For instance, the OK sign has different meanings as you move around the world. Even the thumbs-up gesture is an obscene one in some parts of the world. So when you come to symbolic gestures, there is much more variation because the gestures are more recent—at most only a couple of thousand years old and probably only a few hundred years old.

Only occasionally does a new gesture come along, and it usually doesn't last. The thing about body language is that it is unconscious. Morris once told that "I was watching a traffic jam in America, and I saw a frustrated woman leap out of her car and give the finger to another driver. When she did it, she wasn't thinking 'I'm going to give him the finger.'"⁽⁹⁾ And interestingly the woman didn't feel self-conscious about doing it. It just came naturally to her. These symbolic gestures occur sort of instantaneously and intuitively. In that moment of emotion when she needed that expressive gesture, she wouldn't have been in the mood to think about a new gesture. When someone calls out to see if you're all right, you give them an OK sign. You don't think, "Shall I give him the OK sign with my left hand or my right?" You just do it. Therefore, if it's a new sign which you have to think about, it is not appropriate to the emotional moment which creates it. That is why they are so

slow to notice or catch on.

Nodding In Japan, a negative is indicated by nodding. People are not aware of this but they will nod constantly during a conversation to let the speaker know he/she is being listened to and understood.

Beckoning someone to you is done European-style, similar to the way Americans wave-good-bye, with palm facing downward.

Embarrassment (*shyness or modesty*) is shown when women by covering the mouth. Men in Japan do not concede embarrassment.

Proxemics(Personal Space & Physical Distance)

Personal space is often called “*proxemics*.” National borders and territories should also be viewed within a framework of proxemics. The ability to realize and recognize various zones, space, territorial areas of involvement and activities, relationships, and emotions associated with proximity has become very important. When invasion occurs, stress increases. People will get more on the edge and cultural clashes or border conflicts are likely to occur.

For instance, all animals have a strong exploratory urge, but for some it is more crucial than others....They have to know every nook and cranny, test every possibility, and keep a sharp look-out for the lucky chance... Self-defense can make the same demands... To survive it must know its home range in every minute detail.⁽¹¹⁾

Cultures develop appropriate space and distances for persons engaged in conversation depending on the purpose and nature of message. Edward T. Hall has discovered how interpersonal distances vary culturally, with large differences existing for people in the Arab countries and Latin America compared to the North America. Americans are inclined to keep a greater distance between themselves when engaged in face-to- face interpersonal

communication; Latins and Arabs come closer and stand closer.

When speaking to one another, the Japanese put more space between themselves than do Americans and Europeans in a formal situation. If you trespass this personal territory, you will make your Japanese counterpart feel very uncomfortable. Imagine the amount of your space you would normally put between yourself and another person in the West—then double it. If your Japanese counterpart takes a step back, resists the urge to take a step close.

Tactile communication (Touching) fellow workers and associates is not common in Japan. Patting someone on the back or putting a friendly arm around him/her is not done. Although there is some touching among close friends and people with whom one spends a lot of time, it is not something you can presume. It's best not to imitate it.

Dynamism of Distance/Space

Edward T. Hall conducted research on our out-of-awareness man's sense of space and distance—which is not static, and dealt with four proxemics patters for people of different culture. Four patterns were designed to serve a double purpose: first, to shed light on our own unrecognizable patters and by this means to show improved intercultural understanding ; and second, to contribute to improved design of living, working structures and cities as well. ^(4&5)

Intimate Distance-Close Phase (six to eighteen inches)

At intimate distance, the presence of the other person is unmistakable and overwhelming due to the greatly stepped-up sensory input. Heat from the other person's body, feel of the breath all combine to signal involvement with another body. At close phase level, physical contact and the high possibility of physical involvement is uppermost. A whisper has the effect of expanding the personal space and distance.

Personal Distance-Close Phase (one and a half to two and half feet)

At this personal distance, one can hold or grab the other person. This

space is thought of as a small protective area or double that an organism keeps between itself and others. When it comes to personal far phase (two and a half to four feet), you can keep someone at arms length. The voice level is moderate. Breath odor can be detected.

Social Distance-Close Phase (four to seven feet)

Impersonal business takes place at this distance. People who work together use close social distance at working places. At far distance(seven to twelve feet), the voice level is louder than for the close phase. Desks in the offices of important people are large enough to hold visitors at this phase of social distance.

Public Distance-Close Phase (twelve to twenty-five feet)

Clear details of the skin and eyes are not visible. This distance is outside the circle of personal involvement. Other persons can be seen peripherally.

In regards to public far phase, the voice is amplified(from the stage). Much of the interpersonal communication shifts to gestures and body language.

The second critical barrier is *language*. Idioms, vocabulary, dialects, grammar and syntax, all create difficulty. Since the authors intend to publish another paper dealing with language on another occasion, let us just spell out the following points:

First, every language is a mirror of the culture where it developed. Thus it is not surprising that the Japanese language reflects the psychology, the attitudes and the manners and styles of the Japanese. Second, the Japanese language is said to be the major repository and transmitter of Japanese culture and communication. Third, almost all Japanese have learned the English language for anywhere from two to eight years. And they will usually list English as something they have accomplished. However, in reality, only a few can converse even halfway fluently in the language or understand it when it is spoken to them. The reason for this is that their teachers in school could not

speak English fluently and therefore could not teach it as spoken language. Although tremendous amount of effort was expended in reading English, it was read without benefit of knowing how to pronounce it. Thus it comes out so called “Japanized” in the final analysis. ^(7&8)

Cultural Assumptions

The third critical and dangerous barrier is *cultural assumption*—the hazard of assuming similarity instead of difference. Cultural assumptions are something about the underlying tacit premises shared by members of one culture or the principals on which society and its interaction and communication is based.

People who have brought up in process-oriented cultures, for example, are likely to have a strong urge to scrupulously consider the context of a subject or situation to make the essence of the message comprehensible. Their assumption is “getting down to business” is not a matter of getting straight to the point, but rather taking the time to share an extensive line of thought with their audience, paying particular attention to relevant motives, history, and details. This is perceived as a lengthy and tedious process by people from an action-oriented culture, for whom the message itself is key; the context serves to fill in relevant details later.

But in some cultures, the context completely surmounts the content, The Japanese culture shows this divergence with *honne* and *tatemae*. According to Japanese cultural assumption, *honne* means “substance or true feeling from the heart and refer to honestly meant message. *Tatemae*, on the contrary, can be translated as “form”—like relationship between the “real truth” and the public truth”—referring to statements, required by a specific social situation—which do not necessarily mirror one’s true thoughts or feelings. This is an expression of the ultimate need to be polite and do not confront people.

Another party or audience is supposed to understand what you really

mean by the way you express yourself. The real message is in the process.

Those culturally assumed communication style can be found in all types of information exchanges—be it a Power Point presentation, a conference call or an e-mail message exchange. People who rely on much content to get their message across are put at a disadvantage by all types of long-distant communication. Because of today's speedy e-mails and phone calls, most context is lost, either due to the conciseness or the lack of –non-verbal communication required in an era of few face-to-face communication.

In Japan often in the West, there are times when the two truths do not coincide. And more often, the difference between the two appears to be two-faced. In Japan to keep all-important surface harmony, this is regarded as accepted method.

For non-Japanese, the feelings of confusion or deception result from failing to recognize the *honne* behind the *tatemae*.

Stereotypes/Preconceptions and Prejudices

The fourth barrier is the presence of *stereotypes/preconceptions and prejudices*.

Stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudices work in various ways affecting our interpersonal communication.

A stereotype—similar to a preconception—is a fixed-overtly generalized image and public belief regarding a particular individual, a group or class of people. By stereotyping we presume that a person has a whole range of characteristics and abilities that we assume all members of that group have. Stereotypes are often mixed up with prejudices as a stereotype is based on preconditions. Almost all cultures have developed stereotypes.^(1&7)

So stereotypes are attitudinal sets where we assign attributes to another person on the basis of the class or category. One of the commonly used stereotype examples are Irish are heavy drinkers. Italians are passionate, and

they get into a fight. Many non-Japanese males want to get married Japanese women. Because they are said to be subservient, obedient and docile.

All Blacks are good at sports are stereotypes. Because it's grouping the race together to show that everyone of that race or an ethnic group is so forth and so on.

People produce ethnic jokes on the basis of specific cultural groups. Humorous ethnic jokes do not hurt people, but one advice is that some bad jokes create conflicts and human relations get worse or go in a wrong direction.

We should be careful about the use of ethnic and racial jokes depending on the atmosphere, circumstances and places. Negative stereotypes provide barriers for communicators because they are likely to interfere with objective views.

Prejudices are attitudinal sets that allow us to behave in certain ways toward people mainly on the basis of their membership in some groups.⁽⁶⁾ A case in point is that there was a time an Afro-American was denied membership in a golf county club, but after a new law was enacted, Tiger Wood and other Afro-American golf players were allowed to obtain membership. As we have seen stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudices are closely related. It should be pointed out here that one of the purposes of intercultural communication is how to minimize negative stereotypes, preconceptions and prejudices.

Each society has the concept of communication as a tool for welding human beings together into the family, into a large grouping, the neighborhood, the nation and so on. Every culture also has to have in it—the concept of communication as a pragmatic tool or an instrument for making decisions and carrying out actions. But the emphasis in Japan and Euro-Americans is different. Dean Barnlund study reveals there is more emphasis on verbal communication as a means of preserving and extending social harmony, welding the group together in the West. In the United States, for example, a

greater emphasis on communication as a way of making decisions, solving problems and deciding matters. ⁽⁹⁾

The position of the authors is not to argue this basic theory, but to point out that difference in societies due to different types of communication that takes place in any given time in one society which might be radically different in another society because of different priorities. This means that in an intercultural setting a great deal of miscommunication might be occurring.

In the West, communication generally lays emphasis on verbal aspects which usually consist of transmission of facts, information and data for making decisions, argumentative analysis, and a search for the truth as the means of solving problems. This dialectic process often results in isolation of individuals and conflicts between factions. Despite the great amount of potential conflict inherent in the Western system, many strikingly original, unique and valuable ideas are able to come forth. To insure the continuation of society, the opinion differences are reconciled by means of formulated rules such as voting procedures.

The Japanese communication systems have developed in response to a crowded environment requiring cooperation and submerging of the individual for survival of the group.

The Japanese system of communication as opposed to the Euro-American system is a case in point that has been under discussion in this study. Both systems accomplish what they set out to accomplish. The Japanese communication patterns are structured so as to preserve social harmony by promoting the idea of the inner-feelings, and even more, argumentation and disagreement are looked upon undesirable. To brief in words or statements is considered to be a virtue and a ritual. People in Japan simply do not communicate the same way that people in the West communicate.

The result of all this is a cohesive, cooperative society relatively free of conflict in which decisions are slowly carried out with tremendous force. In

Japan, communication is used as a means to express empathy and sympathy with people rather than communicate specific or articulate ideas and opinions.

On this theme, Edward T. Hall gives an account of his experience travelling in Japan with his associates.

I had been to Japan and again found my countrymen frustrated by what they called “indirection.” It was also evident that the Japanese were equally turned off by our insisting on spelling out “logical” steps without reference to context. The Japanese are very consistent once you get to know them, but unpredictable if you don’t. Admittedly, it is difficult for hard-nosed American businessman to deal with indirection and accustom themselves to that fact that in Japan verbal agreements are binding and much preferred to the ironbound written contract of the West, which can always be nullified or abrogated anyway. ^(5,p.45)

In Japanese culture, tacit understanding is more prevalent than in American culture. Moreover, the invasion of privacy by using direct questioning is also offensive in Japan. Such questions as, “Why do you not come?,” “What were you doing?” will be received negatively. Do also not to argue with a person or force him/her to take one side of an argument. Some Japanese may appreciate this kind of intellectual contest, but the average Japanese does not understand this type of behavior. Euro-American practice of attempting to influence people through verbalization is not Japanese style.

Personal Disclosure Level on Conversational Topics

Dean Barnlund conducted an interesting research on self disclosure level on conversation topics when Americans and Japanese encounter in interpersonal communication settings. First, Barnlund came up with the detailed measure called “verbal thought disclosure”—“How much will a

person tell about him/herself ? if you ask him/her certain questions.” The first measure he made was to attempt to determine whether Japanese and Americans disclosed more of themselves to more people or not.

And the results were: First both societies rank topics in exactly the same way. That is to say that both societies regard it proper to talk about certain things and not to talk about other things. And Japanese and Americans agreed on interests, work and opinions were most talked about topics while financial matters, personality and physical characteristics were less discussed. Put it differently, where you are a Japanese or an American makes no difference in terms of the kinds of conversational topics you employ. Furthermore, in regards to certain people, there was also a similar ranking. Japanese and Americans tend to talk more completely, that is, disclose themselves more completely such peers to their friends, the same-sex, opposite-sex than to their parents—father or mother—and more to their parents than they do to a stranger or to an untrusted person.

But when it come to the depth of disclosure, it was strikingly different.

The average level of disclosure for Japanese on most topics was only a general kind of remark, whereas regarding Americans it came very closer to being a depth of disclosure. A surprising finding was the Japanese disclosed themselves completely to their mothers pertaining to their taste in food, while with Americans there were many topics that were disclosed completely to a number of different persons. Therefore, in terms of the general level of disclosure, Barnlund’s findings did support his original hypothesis that the public self represented a larger part of the personality in the American culture than it did in the Japanese culture.

On verbal disclosure, when it comes to the level of disclosure to various target persons—the persons with whom we converse, his study found the same general thing. That is a much deeper level of disclosure to all people by Americans than the Japanese disclose to their associates was discovered.

Another provocative figure was the low rate of disclosure to Japanese fathers on the part of the Japanese. This means, as a well-known cultural anthropologist, Ruth Benedict, once put that the father tends to be a very isolated figure in the Japanese family. Among Americans, the disclosure to mother and father varies very little. The disclosure to male and female friend varies not at all. In other words, Americans disclose almost as much to a stranger as the Japanese disclose to their own father. ⁽²⁾

Ethnocentrism

The fifth element which impedes interpersonal intercultural communication process is *Ethnocentrism*. This is another major cause of intercultural variance in attitude. It contains a tendency to view unconsciously people and other cultures by using our own group of people and our own customs and norms as standard for all judgements.

Such slogans “Our country first”—placing their country, racial, ethnic groups at the pillar or center of the universe and belittle and rate all others accordingly. This notion and idea also demands their first loyalty and create a frame of reference that denies the existence of any other frame of reference. It is dangerously absolute position that keeps any other position from being appropriate or proper for another culture. Especially, political jingoism, nationalism, nationalistic ethnocentric attitudes are a main barrier to intercultural communication.

When we allow ethnocentrism to interfere with our social perceptions, the effective or productive communication is reduced. Because we are not able to view aspects of another culture which is different from our own objectively.

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