Cooperative
ESL Ministries

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION HANDBOOK

CESLM INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION HANDBOOK

By

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP DESIGN

& MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

By

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INTERCULTURAL RESOURCE LIST

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CULTURE

DEFINITION OF CULTURE

Although there are many definitions of culture in dictionaries, on the internet, and in resource books, some aspects emerge that are common to all. Culture is a human phenomenon common to a group of people. It is transmitted by one generation and learned by the next— through observation, rules, and guidelines. Geert Hofstede, an international authority on cross-cultural social psychology, says, "Every person carries within him or herself patterns of thinking, feeling and potential acting which were learned throughout their lifetime".[1] He defines culture as the *software of the mind*.

ELEMENTS OF CULTURE

Culture is made up of ideas, behaviours, and products. Cultural products are such things as literature, folklore, art, music, and artifacts. Cultural behaviours include customs, habits, dress, food, and leisure. These are things we can observe about a specific culture. We are familiar with the products and behaviours of culture, but another important aspect to culture is the basic assumptions and values that prescribe the *thinking* and the *motivation* behind every interaction.

One way of seeing this concept is the analogy of the iceberg. What we can observe about a culture is like the visible part of an iceberg. The massive, invisible part of the iceberg hiding underwater represents those things we cannot observe—the basic assumptions and values of a culture.

Visible: Ways of Doing →

Invisible: Ways of Being & Ways of Thinking

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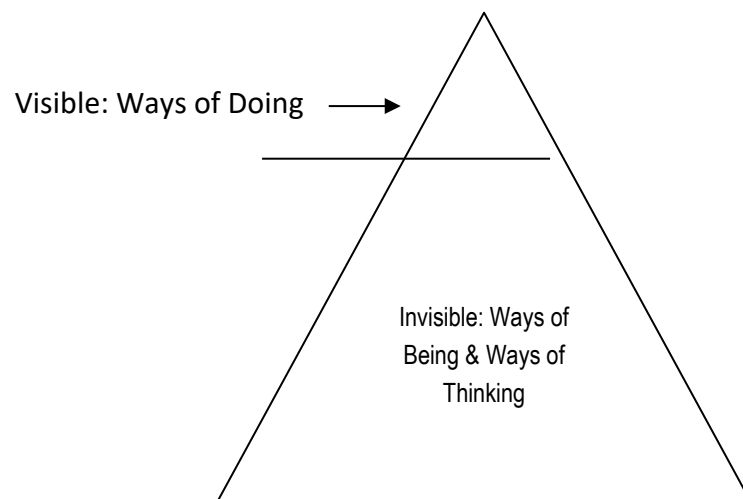
[1] G. Hofstede. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. NY: McGraw-Hill. p. 4

OUR OWN CULTURE

"There is an invisible world out there and we are living in it." –Bill Viola, video artist

One of the biggest steps toward effective intercultural communication is knowing our own culture and recognizing the powerful impact it has on our thoughts, our communication (verbal and non-verbal), and our interpersonal relationships. This applies not only to relationships with people from other cultures, but also to the way we communicate with people from our own culture—family members, friends, neighbours, and coworkers.

Ethnocentrism

This is the tendency of most people to judge other cultures by the standards of their own culture, which they believe to be superior. Culture prescribes the behaviour (and language) that is believed to be appropriate for a given situation. This *appropriate behaviour* is based on common assumptions and values, or ideas held as *common sense* to a specific group of people. We spend our formative years observing, absorbing, and learning the values, rules, and guidelines of our own culture, without realizing this process is happening. Albert Einstein said, "Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen."[2]

People tend to act logically based on their own beliefs and circumstances. From an individual perspective, this common-sense combination of basic assumptions, values, and circumstances determines logical behaviour. When you observe ambiguous or irrational communication (behaviour or language), you are not sharing the same basic assumptions or understanding of the circumstances as the communicator is. In other words, your idea of common sense is not *common* to everyone.

Misattribution

This is a problem common to all cultures. It occurs when we witness behaviour that is ambiguous or strange, from our perspective. We then interpret the situation and assign motivation, based on our own cultural frame of reference. Misattribution is hard to recognize because our own cultural values are so ingrained, and because it is often triggered by an immediate emotional response to *inappropriate behaviour*. The tendency is to provide a negative characteristic or motivation to the other person. Hofstede says, "There is always a temptation to feel that the others have bad character or bad intentions, rather than to realize that they are acting according to different rules."[3] It is important to recognize *when* we are passing judgement on the behaviour of others, without considering other possible interpretations

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[2] http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/a/albert_einstein.html
[3] Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede. (2002). *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p.42

of the situation. "The core of intercultural awareness is learning to separate observation from interpretation."[4]

Stereotypes and Generalizations

The way we think and talk about other cultures and people creates problems in intercultural communication. Stereotypes are often based on how we think about people from other cultures; and by the words we use to describe them.

A stereotype is a mistaken idea, from an outsider's perspective, about a culture different from their own. It is an exaggerated image, or a restrictive belief, about the characteristics of a group. Sometimes it is a negative idea about a certain type or individual, applied to everyone from that specific group or culture.

A more accurate description of a cultural tendency is an archetype. An archetype is developed from an insider's perspective—neither accusative, nor restrictive. An archetype presents a general idea of cultural norms, customs, and values without limiting any individual, being the archetype.[5]

In this document, the term generalization conveys a meaning similar to archetype. Although generalizations and stereotypes are often considered the same, there are some key differences. Stating general cultural values and characteristics means they represent a tendency or trend within a culture. This allows room for individual differences within a culture, as well as values and customs representing that culture. For example, general Canadian cultural values would refer to a wide slice from the centre of the bell curve—if our collective values and characteristics were plotted on a graph.[6]

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[4] ibid. p.17

[5] GammaVision, Inc. "Culturally-Based Patterns of Difference" (Kochman Communication Consultants, Ltd., San Francisco) quoted in Patty Lane. (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

[6] Laroche. (2003). *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions*. New York: Butterworth-Heinemann.

CULTURAL VALUES AND HOW WE SEE THEM

In her book, *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures,* Patty Lane describes culture as a set of lenses through which people see the world. Each culture has its own set of lenses.[7] If we understand our own cultural lenses—how they differ from the cultural lenses of other cultures—we can build effective intercultural relationships.

IDENTITY: INDIVIDUALISM VS. COLLECTIVISM

This cultural lens determines the source of our identity. It tells us who we are, describing us in relation to our society.

Individualism

Our western culture highly values individualism. The focus is on individual achievement and individual rights. We expect people to be responsible for themselves and their actions. We raise our children to be responsible individuals, functioning independently because we expect them, as adults, to look after themselves and their families.

Our school and legal system, as well as our communities and society, are set up to function with this principle. Our schools encourage students to give personal opinions—teaching individual problem solving. Schools also teach self-esteem and self-reliance because we *must* learn to rely on ourselves.

There is easy mobility between classes in society; movement is based on personal achievement and wealth. Patronage is weak in our culture, and in some cases is seen as corrupt.

Conflict and competition are expected. Business contracts are based on individual interests and bound with legal ties. Decision-making within an organization is often quick, sometimes involving open voting in meetings with each individual voting in support of, or against, an idea.

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[7] Patty Lane. (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Collectivism

This focus on the individual is different for two thirds of the world's population. These cultures function on the idea of collectivism. The most important focus is the group (extended family or close community). Loyalty to this group is valued above all else. Family responsibilities extend beyond the immediate family, encompassing group members' extended families.

Schooling focuses on attaining knowledge through a higher authority—with children gaining identity and self-esteem through the group. They get support and respect from the group and learn to rely on the family/group for support. Problem-solving and decision-making takes a long time, since the focus is on gaining consensus within the *group*.

There is very little mobility between classes in society. Patronage is a reward for loyalty to the group. A patronage relationship can last a lifetime.

Honour, Shame, Face

One of the central values of a collectivist culture (two-thirds of the world's people) is the idea of saving face. Bringing honour to one's family or group is paramount. To fail, or to cause an embarrassment, is to bring shame upon yourself and your group. It is very important to save face, so others can save face and maintain honour as well.

"The idea of saving face serves several important purposes: preserving interpersonal relationships, maintaining harmony, minimizing potential for conflict, restoring community solidarity (family, tribal or group) and facilitating communication between the various levels of society." [8]

It is very important in a collectivistic culture to protect your rights without humbling or shaming others. This idea is so important that the potential for disgrace, bringing shame to yourself or to others, is a key component in decision-making. It is an even greater tragedy if this shaming is done in public. If a person is shamed in front of family, friends, or colleagues—a broken relationship is inevitable.

"The English words humiliation and disgrace come closest to the concept of shame, but they fail to carry the intense negative impact and social stigma of shame in these Two-Thirds World cultures." [9]
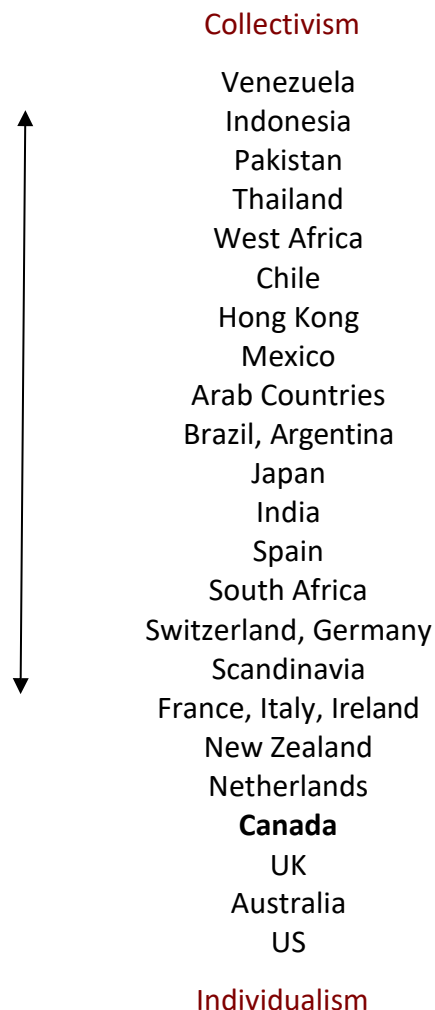
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[8] Duane Elmer. (1993). *Cross-Cultural Conflict.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 54

[9] ibid p. 54-55

How does identity affect intercultural communication?

o Directness, confrontation, and candid expression of personal opinions are valued in an individualistic culture. This is an honest and straight-forward style of communication for people who value autonomy above all else.

o People from a collectivistic culture communicate in an indirect style of communication (passive voice rather than active voice), using non-verbal cues. They do this so that others will not be embarrassed or *put on the spot*, allowing them to save face.

o Communication difficulties may arise for people from an individualistic culture because they do not know how to interpret non-verbal cues correctly, or understand the importance of *reading between the lines*.

o A direct communication style is considered impulsive, shocking, and embarrassing to people from a collectivistic culture.

Much that is written about culture and identity is based on the work of Geert Hofstede. Here is a comparison of various cultures around the world on Collectivism vs. Individualism.[10]

<p align="center">Collectivism</p>

<p align="center">
Venezuela
Indonesia
Pakistan
Thailand
West Africa
Chile
Hong Kong
Mexico
Arab Countries
Brazil, Argentina
Japan
India
Spain
South Africa
Switzerland, Germany
Scandinavia
France, Italy, Ireland
New Zealand
Netherlands
Canada
UK
Australia
US
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<p align="center">Individualism</p>

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[10] G. Hofstede. (1991) *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill. p. 53

Possible Misattributions

- o A person from a collectivistic culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of an individualist as extremely insensitive and often as personally insulting, heartless, and rude.

- o A person from an individualistic culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of collectivists as irresponsible and dishonest.

CONTEXT—HIGH VS. LOW

Much of the information available about context and culture comes originally from the work of Edward T. Hall who described the social frameworks of cultures as High-Context or Low-Context.[11]

This cultural lens tells us about the context of an event or an activity. "Context is how we read an event or a conversation. What surrounds, precedes, and directs the action within that event is context."[12] It tells us about the importance of the environment and encompasses such things as the location and ambience of the setting; the process (how the meeting is conducted, how the participants were invited, how people are introduced or addressed, where participants sit); appearance (casual or formal attire and attitude); non-verbal communication (facial expression, tone of voice).[13]

High-Context Cultures

In a high-context culture, life is holistic; everything is part of the whole. There are no boundaries separating work life, home life, social life, or spiritual life—all are part of the holistic life. You cannot separate an idea being expressed, nor the person expressing it—they are the same. Non-verbal communication provides the context for conversation it is important to read between the lines. It is always the listener's responsibility to understand what is being said.

In high-context cultures, context has great value and meaning—context of an event is as important as the event itself. In high-context countries, people need a lot of information before making decisions. They want to understand the background and the history of the situation to avoid making mistakes. Before working together, they earn trust through sharing information (personal and project related). This trust is

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[11]Edward T. Hall. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. NY: Anchor Books. p. 91

[12] Sauvé. (2007). *Understanding and Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical and Professional Workplaces*—From a workshop sponsored by Canada Immigration & Alberta Employment, Immigration and Industry. p. 12

[13] Patty Lane. (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. InterVarsity Press. p 48-49

based on deep relationships built with care over many years. High-context cultures rely on intuition, trust, collective input, and consensus building to guide the decision-making process.
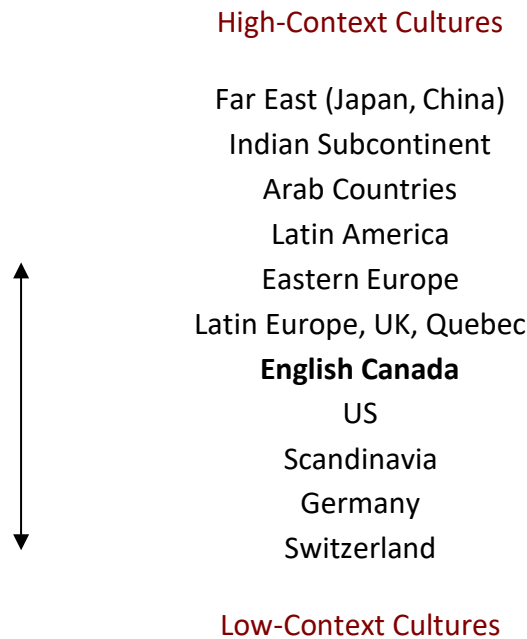
Low-Context Cultures

We live in a low-context culture characterized by analytical thinking. There are boundaries between work life, social life, home life, and spiritual life. Low-context cultures prefer messages spelled out—with more value placed on verbal communication, than non-verbal. The message is more important than the context; and the speaker is responsible for communication.

Low-context people work with others without *needing to know* much information. They deal with problems as they arise in a more relaxed and efficient way. Independent decision making (showing initiative) is valued and takes less time than a collective consensus, which is appreciated in a low-context culture.

How does context affect intercultural communication?

- As people from a low-context culture, we believe the speaker is responsible for communication. Teachers and presenters check if listeners understand.

- However, when we check for understanding, a person from a high-context culture will say "Yes", whether they understand it or not. In their culture, it is the listener's responsibility to understand what was said—not wanting to lose face, or for you to lose face.

- In a classroom or work setting, it is difficult to correct the work of someone from a high-context culture. Because they believe that the idea and the person are the same, any correction makes them feel that we are rejecting them and their work.

- In North American businesses, the standard business greeting is, "How can I help you?" This can be misconceived by a high-context person, seeing it as an indicator you think they need help.

- To communicate effectively with people from high-context cultures, we need to be aware of body language, protocol, and etiquette considered to be appropriate for the situation. In other words, we need to read between the lines.

Comparison of various cultures around the world in the context scale[14]

High-Context Cultures

Far East (Japan, China)
Indian Subcontinent
Arab Countries
Latin America
Eastern Europe
Latin Europe, UK, Quebec
English Canada
US
Scandinavia
Germany
Switzerland

Low-Context Cultures

Possible Misattributions

- o   A person from a low-context culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of people from high-context cultures as overly sensitive, extremely formal, and very picky about details.

- o   A person from a high-context culture can misperceive the culture-based behaviour of people from low-context cultures as insensitive, disrespectful, uncaring, and extremely lax about protocol and etiquette (i.e. rude).

AUTHORITY—HIERARCHICAL VS. EGALITARIAN

This cultural lens shows us the influence of authority. It tells us who's in charge, encompassing ideas such as societal structure, power distance, and status.

To understand this concept, we need first to define some of the terms.

- o   **Hierarchical Structure** is a clear chain of command found in organizations such as bureaucracies, corporations, governments, or the military.[15]

- o   **Egalitarian Structure** refers to a society without formalized differences in the access to power, influence, and wealth.[16]

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[14] Laroche. (2003). *Managing Cultural Diversity in Technical Professions*. p. 91
[15] https://sociologydictionary.org/hierarchy-of-authority/
[16] oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html

- o **Power Distance** is the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unevenly.[17] It measures how much a culture has respect for authority.

- o **Ascribed Status** is a status assigned at birth or assumed involuntarily later in life, often based on biological factors, that cannot be changed through individual effort or achievement.[18] It is the result of inheritance or hereditary factors.

- o **Achieved or Merited Status** is a status that is acquired or earned as the result of personal accomplishment and merit, that serves as a reflection of ability, choice, or personal effort.[19]

Hierarchical Structure: High Power Distance—Ascribed Status

This society is structured as a strict hierarchy. Status is ascribed at birth. Individuals are judged based on caste/social class, gender, age, and by who they know. Self-esteem and identity come from status. Age is valued and respected. Opinions of the elderly are valued for their experience and wisdom. Being older and white-haired is an advantage. Asking someone's age is acceptable. Being male is valued over being female.

In the workplace there is formal communication between superiors and employees. A large social distance exists between those who have power, and those who do not. Lower level managers avoid decision-making and prefer to closely follow instructions from superiors. Relationships are more important than tasks.

Malaysia and the Philippines rank at the high end of the chart for power distance according to Hofstede.[20] Those rated next highest are Mexico, Venezuela, and India.

Egalitarian Structure: Low Power Distance—Achieved Status

Egalitarian society plays down status. There is an emphasis on work and personal achievement. Individuals are judged on what they have accomplished in education, finances, and business success. Self-esteem and identity come from achievements.

Low social status at birth does not hinder the ability to succeed in life. Youth is valued, and age is not as important as accomplishments and achievements. A young person is given authority and decision-making power in the workplace based on previous performance. Youth is seen as the new energy, enthusiasm,

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[17] wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/213/218150/glossary.html
[18] https://sociologydictionary.org/ascribed-status/
[19] https://sociologydictionary.org/achieved-status/
[20] G. Hofstede. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. NY: McGraw-Hill. p. 26

and creativity to compete in society. This culture tries to hide age and avoids discussing it. Women are valued more equally with men, based on personal accomplishments and achievements.

At work there are fewer forms of communication between superiors and employees. Managers are more democratic decision-makers. Employees are not closely supervised and expect to be consulted in decision-making. Tasks are more important than relationships.

Canada ranks in the lower half with a score of 39; however, the lowest scores are Austria (11), Israel (13), Denmark (18), and New Zealand (22).[21]

Uncertainty Avoidance vs. Risk Tolerance

Although not true in every case, cultures having a high level of uncertainty avoidance, tend to be collective cultures with a hierarchical structure and high-power distance. People from these cultures are comfortable when everyone knows their proper place or role in society; and when social order is maintained.

Cultures having a high level of risk tolerance, tend to be individualistic cultures with an egalitarian structure and low power distance.

How do power distance and authority affect intercultural communication?

- o People from a hierarchical society display a great deal of deference to persons of high status and rank in their society. A person of lower status will not give an opinion or speak frankly if a person of high status is involved in the conversation or the meeting. This can be frustrating for a person from an egalitarian society who is trying to gauge opinions or collect information.

- o People from an egalitarian society do not display a great deal of deference to persons of high status or rank in their society. When a person from a hierarchical society uses titles and/or honorifics to address us we find it to be too formal and very uncomfortable.

Possible Misattributions

- o A person from a hierarchical culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from egalitarian cultures as disrespectful, improper, and rude. They "do not know their place".

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[21] G. Hofstede. (1991) *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind.* NY: McGraw-Hill. p. 26

- In the workplace, a person from egalitarian cultures may misperceive the motives of middle management from a hierarchical culture (that does not take initiative or make decisions without consulting the boss) as being lazy and indecisive.

- A person from an egalitarian culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from hierarchical cultures as bossy and rigid (high-status persons), or as servile and cowardly (low-status person).[22]

ACTIVITY—TASK-ORIENTATION VS. RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTATION

This cultural lens is based on the motivation of a culture, or what drives its behaviour. Hofstede calls this cultural distinction *masculine culture* versus *feminine culture*. He describes it as follows:

"It has been found that in all countries in the world, an unequal role distribution between men and women coincides with a tougher society in which there is more emphasis on achievement and fighting than on caring and compromise. If men and women are more equal, the result is more feminine qualities within society as a whole. This is the reason why we call an equal role distribution between the genders in a culture *Feminine* and an unequal distribution, *Masculine*. Alternative names are care-oriented versus achievement-oriented. These names have the advantage of not being confused with male versus female, but they are less vivid."[23]

Patty Lane uses the term *doing* cultures for those that value results and materialism and the term *being* cultures for those that value relationships and quality of life. She points out they appear more like personality types rather than cultural values. However, despite variations of motivation within a culture, they describe a propensity within an entire culture toward one, or the other. This cultural lens impacts how we value people, especially their activities and gender roles. For *doing* cultures, activities that produce results are valued as are the people involved in those activities. For *being* cultures, activities that enhance and build relationships are valued.[24]

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[22] Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede. (2002). *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 43
[23] Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede. (2002). *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 37
[24] Patty Lane. (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 61-62

How does activity orientation affect intercultural communication?

People from relationship-oriented cultures feel that our (North American) culture is friendly, but shallow, depending on circumstances. They believe real friendships are deep and long-term.

"In much of African, Hispanic, and Asian culture, setting a time, place, and agenda for an evening together signals that you want a more formal, prescribed relationship, not a friendship. One signals a desire for friendship by stopping by the person's house, *unannounced*. Often, it's called "popping in". Popping in at mealtime is all the better; now you can eat together and spend the evening chatting.".[25] In many cultures people will generally cook more than they need because people are always popping in.

In a work group or committee setting, people from task-oriented cultures become frustrated by slow progress towards results, when people from relationship-oriented cultures take time to consider implications that may arise for a project, and the impact each of these may have on those involved in a project.

Possible Misattributions

- o A person from a task-oriented culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from a relationship-oriented culture as weak and ineffective.

- o On the other hand, a person from a relationship-oriented culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons from a task-oriented culture as shallow and uncaring of others. They see it as "showing off" and sometimes as aggressive.

TIME ORIENTATION—LIMITED-TIME VS. ABUNDANT-TIME

Time orientation defines our sense of time. It is important to decide if a culture is a limited-time, or an abundant-time culture. The Greek reference is *chronos* (chronological time) or *kairos* (opportunity). Edward T. Hall uses the terms *monochronic* and *polychromic* time systems for these concepts.[26] Time Horizon describes a cultures' way of looking at the time continuum.

Limited-Time Culture

We live in a limited-time culture where it is important to know when we start, when we finish, and when projects are due. We like to have appointments at a specific time—with one person at a time being served. We think people should be served based on time of arrival (first come, first served—the British

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[25] Duane Elmer. (1993). *Cross-Cultural Conflict.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 100
[26] Edward. T. Hall. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. NY: Anchor Books. p. 17

concept of queuing). In our culture, being on time is very important—people who are late, or do not meet deadlines, are *slack* and *lazy*.

Abundant-Time Culture

People who live in an abundant-time culture see time as an opportunity or an event. The time to start is when everyone has arrived. The time to finish is when everyone has had a good visit and has said what needed to be said. There is no rush because people are more important than time. "Time is understood more in terms of opportunity, the right time, the appropriate time or the meaningful time. Thus, *kairos* people value the moment, the event or the opportunity and try to make it significant or memorable."[27] First Nations people, Latin Americans, and Africans are among the abundant-time cultures.

Time Horizon

People in mainstream North American culture, which is a relatively new culture, tend to be focused on a time horizon which encompasses the immediate future and looks back only to the recent past. Older cultures, such as Chinese, Indians, Ethiopians, or Europeans have longer time horizons. Their focus is the past, looking back over a much longer period of history. The traditional or historical way of doing things has an important influence on decision making.

How does time orientation affect intercultural communication?

Time orientation does not affect communication so much as it affects relationships and organizations. If there is a very short time frame for a project, or if a meeting can be held only at a certain time (for technological reasons), it is frustrating from a limited-time culture perspective, resulting in a lack of patience with tardiness from those living within an abundant-time culture.

Possible Misattributions

o   A person from a limited-time (*chronos)* culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of those from an abundant-time culture as lazy and irresponsible.

o   A person from an abundant-time (*kairos*) culture may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of those from a limited-time (*chronos)* culture as uptight, unfriendly, and cold.

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[27] Duane Elmer. (1993). *Cross-Cultural Conflict*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 122

Worldview—Premodern, Modern, Postmodern

A worldview is the foundation of a cultures' or an individuals' way of thinking. It describes the cognitive process of a culture. In other words, cultural values are *what* a culture think; worldview describes *how* a culture thinks.

"A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being."[28]

Below worldview is described in three perspectives: premodern, modern, and postmodern. Woven into these worldviews are many variables. To give us a better idea of the meaning of these worldviews, Patty Lane includes a table showing how some of the variables are seen by persons thinking in a premodern, modern, or postmodern way.

Variables That Comprise Worldview [29]

		PREMODERN	MODERN	POSTMODERN
TRUTH		Subjective: based on tradition	Objective	Subjective: based on experience
KNOWLEDGE		Mystical: capricious	Scientific	Mystical: understandable
PERSPECTIVE		Holistic	Dualistic, Linear	Holistic
EVIDENCE		Experiential: group then individual	Empirical: based on experiment and observation	Experiential: Individual; then group

To communicate with people of different cultures one must have an awareness of the others' worldview and beliefs. This does not mean you need to agree with the other persons' worldview. However, you will communicate more clearly if you understand the boundaries of the other persons' reality.

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[28] James W. Sire. (2004). *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as a Concept*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 122

[29] Rex Miller & Brad Cecil. *"Discerning the Times" Leadership Network 6 (Winter 2000)*—As listed in Patty Lane. (2002). *A Beginner's Guide to Crossing Cultures*. InterVarsity Press. p. 107

BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

THE EFFECT OF CULTURE ON COMMUNICATION STYLE

"Messages are often distorted as they go through the cultural filter of each person. This filter refers to how a culture verbally and nonverbally packages a message. The packaging is significantly different from one culture to the next."[30]

Direct vs. Indirect Communication

Cultures that use indirect communication focus on relationships; they always take time to observe the social niceties. The message is conveyed through context using non-verbal cues or subtle changes in tone or pitch to indicate meaning. The meaning of the message is hidden or implied through these contextual clues. The communication tends to be personal—one must read between the lines to get the idea. Indirect communicators deal with conflict indirectly, to save face, and will often use a third party to assist in solving a problem or a conflict.

Cultures that use a direct style of communication focus on accomplishing the task. They deliver their message without any preliminaries, using clear and concise language. The meaning is obvious; and the communication tends to be impersonal. They deal with conflict head on and face to face.

When one person uses a direct cultural style, and the other an indirect cultural style, problems may arise. The direct person sees the indirect communicator as simple-minded and unfocused, with no idea what the indirect person is trying to communicate. The indirect person sees the direct communicator as blunt, uncaring, rude, and unsophisticated.

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[30] Laroche & Rutherford. (2007). *Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 101

Direct and indirect communication preferences by country.[31]

<p style="text-align:center">Direct Communication Cultures</p>

<p style="text-align:center">
Germany
Netherlands
Eastern Europe
Scandinavia
United States
United Kingdom
France
Canada
Middle East
Latin America
Southeast Asia
Japan
</p>

<p style="text-align:center">Indirect Communication Cultures</p>

To avoid miscommunication:

- Direct communicators need to learn how to observe carefully and pick up on some of the subtleties of communication.

- Indirect communicators need to practice using a more direct style of communication until it feels more comfortable for them.

Canadian Misattributions Based on Pronunciation and Social Use of English

Canadians who are native English speakers need to be aware of the possible misattributions they assign to non-native or ESL speakers based on pronunciation, or the inappropriate use of register (the level of formality or the 'social use' of English).

- It is common for the rhythm and stress of first language to carry over into English pronunciation. A rapid monotone and evenly-stressed delivery in English sounds, to a Canadian, like the person is annoyed, irritated, or angry. This is mainly a Canadian misattribution, applied often to persons whose first language is German, Dutch, Polish, Czech, or Romanian (central European).

- Newcomers attempt to use their best and most academic form of English, particularly if they come from a culture where a high level of education and sophistication are part of the ascribed

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[31] ibid. p. 144

status. In Canadian culture, an inverse snobbery is ingrained by the culture, with the level of formality in language varying, depending on the social situation. As somewhat indirect communicators, Canadians use language that is *too* formal for situations, indicating irritation or anger. When a newcomer uses language that is inappropriately formal in a non-formal situation, Canadians may misperceive the communicator as *ticked off* or *patronizing*.

o   In some cultures, speaking very quietly shows respect. This indicates that the speaker is well-educated and well-mannered. This can be misperceived by Canadians as servile, or wimpy behaviour.

Non-Verbal Messages

"Non-verbal communication refers to all information exchange except that involving the literal meaning of the words being used."[32]

o   Greeting people by touching and kissing is a dangerous area of non-verbal communication. In some cultures, touching indicates a friendly and caring attitude. In other cultures, touching persons of the opposite sex is wrong, and considered rude. Kissing is taboo in some cultures—only for family and close friends. In others, it is an acceptable public behaviour.

o   Personal space varies from culture to culture. Canadians require a larger personal space than most cultures. An indicator of personal space differences is when a person from another culture moves into your personal comfort zone—and you back away. The opposite can also be true. If people back away from you, they may feel you are moving into their comfort zone.

o   It is important we realize that body language and gestures may look the same, but have a completely different meaning in another culture. Nodding your head means "No" in Nepal. Shaking your head from side to side means you agree. For further information read *Gestures* by Roger E. Axtell.

o   Silence and turn-taking in conversation varies from culture to culture. In some cultures, silence is part of conversation. It shows that you are listening and that you respect the wisdom of the speaker. It also gives time for careful thought before replying. Cultures that use silence in this way are Far East and Middle East cultures, Scandinavian cultures (particularly Finland & Norway), and First Nations cultures.

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[32] Laroche & Rutherford. (2007). *Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 101

- In Anglo-American cultures we use turn-taking[33] in conversation. One person speaks, and when they finish, the other person speaks. We are uncomfortable with silence in the conversation—assuming something is wrong (i.e. the listener is disapproving or at a loss for words).

- In Latin American and Latin European cultures, speakers overlap each other in conversation. This style is used to show a keen and passionate interest in the conversation. However, it is frustrating to Anglo-Americans who like orderly conversation. Latin American /European cultures see silence or turn-taking as lack of interest in the conversation.

Thinking and Reasoning Patterns

Patterns of thinking, defining issues, solving problems, making points, and arriving at decisions vary from culture to culture. Western culture teaches and uses a linear sequential pattern for reasoning and logic. Ideas are presented like the links of a chain—with clearly defined steps moving directly to a solution or conclusion. This fits with the Western individualistic culture—a straightforward, direct communication style.

The Asian thinking style can be described as a spiral moving from the outside and swirling around in smaller and smaller circles toward the main thought or idea. It has also been illustrated as an onion with many thin and subtle layers that are gradually peeled away to reveal the central truth at the core. Each layer of the onion, or cycle of the spiral, reveals additional ideas and background important in reaching the main thought. This fits with a high-context, collectivistic culture with an indirect communication style, which is important for protecting people's face and not causing embarrassment or shame.[34]

According to Elmer, the African thinking style can be described in the shape of a flower—a daisy-shaped pattern. The speaker or writer would begin with a point (centre of the flower); use an illustration to expand the point (making a petal); and then return to the point or topic again. Continuing, the speaker would repeat the point, go off in another direction to expand the point (next petal), and return to the point. Elmer believes this to be a very effective public speaking style.[35]

Hispanic thinking style tends to be deductive rather than inductive. The starting point is very general. Issues are defined and categorized before the main principle is decided. Logic follows to a conclusion,

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[33] Laroche & Rutherford. (2007). *Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 130

[34] Duane Elmer. (2002). *Cross-Cultural Connections.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p.153

[35] ibid. p.156

with less attention to supporting evidence than required in Western thought. Sometimes new evidence is interpreted in light of the main principle, which has already been determined.[36]

Expressiveness

Although people of all cultures have similar emotions, the appropriate verbal and non-verbal display of emotions varies from culture to culture. Laroche and Rutherford give an example that Texans seem loud, brash, and boisterous to Canadians, but that Canadians appear loud and brash to Indonesians.

Verbal display is concerned with vocal variety—the voice rising and falling and changing in pitch and volume. Non-verbal display refers to facial expressions and body movements involving fingers, hands, arms, and legs. In some cases, only an attentive observer would be able to identify the slight emotion being expressed; while in others the behaviour expressed is very exuberant and the voice is loud, making it easy to identify.[37]

Cultures that value free expression of emotion think of themselves as open, honest, and trustworthy. They believe their candor is appreciated because it reflects sincerity. Within their culture, showing emotion leads to more trusting relationships.

Cultures that are less emotionally demonstrative, limit the expression of emotion. They feel communication should be clear and concise without personal emotion attached to be more effective at accomplishing a common task. They avoid angry confrontations at all costs, having trouble trusting people that show excess emotion.

Misattributions often occur between these two cultural groups. These misattributions are very important in an organizational setting, affecting both the work team relationships and decisions made about leadership and promotion.

- o   Cultures that value free expression of emotion may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of less emotionally demonstrative people as cold, distant, uncaring, unreadable, and noncommittal.

- o   Cultures that are less emotionally demonstrative may misperceive the culture-based behaviour of persons who freely express emotion as lack of control, immature, childish, and not a good candidate for leadership.

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[36] Duane Elmer. (2002). *Cross-Cultural Connections*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. p. 158

[37] Laroche & Rutherford. (2007). *Recruiting, Retaining, and Promoting Culturally Different Employees*. Oxford, UK: Butterworth-Heinemann. p. 112

ATTITUDE: A STUMBLING BLOCK TO EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

One of the stumbling blocks to intercultural communication can be the attitude and motivation of the people involved. We cannot change others' attitude; but we can always monitor our own. In his book *Cross-Cultural Dialogues*, Craig Storti offers us seven lessons on the famous *Do Nots* of intercultural communication.

Seven Lessons (paraphrased from Craig Storti)[38]

Lesson 1—Do not assume sameness. Try to entertain the notion that other people may be very different from you.

Lesson 2—What you think of as normal or human behaviour may only be cultural. Before you project your norms onto others, consider that you may be wrong.

Lesson 3—Familiar behaviours may have different meanings. Just because you have recognized a given behaviour, do not assume you understand it.

Lesson 4—Do not assume that what you meant was understood. Check for signs that the other person did or did not understand you.

Lesson 5—Do not assume that you understood the intended meaning. You hear what others say through your own experience. You know what those words normally mean, but whose norms are you following? Yours? Or the foreigner's? If the foreigner's, then what are their norms?

Lesson 6 - You do not have to like *different* behaviour, but try to understand where it comes from. You may never get used to some things foreigners do; however, you can try to figure out why they behave that way. Even when you know the cultural explanation of this behaviour, you still may not like it.

Lesson 7 - Most people behave rationally; you just need to discover the reason. Foreigners are not acting this way just to bother you. This is how they are.

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[38] Craig Storti. (1994) *"Seven Lessons"* from *Cross-Cultural Dialogues*. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press. p. 129-131

CULTURE SHOCK

Some barriers to effective intercultural communication can be overcome by recognizing potential problems and developing skills and strategies to help us work around them. Culture shock happens to newcomers, and we cannot prevent it. However, we can provide support and assistance if we recognize the signs of culture shock and understand what the newcomer is experiencing.

Definition of Culture Shock

Culture shock is a term used to describe the anxiety and feelings (surprise, disorientation, confusion) felt by an individual—often caused by an entirely new environment, such as a different country. It often relates to the inability to assimilate to the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not. Often this is combined with strong disgust (moral or aesthetical) about certain aspects of the foreign culture.[39]

One of the most difficult problems for immigrants is culture shock. It is a deeply personal experience, affecting individuals in different ways. Even though there are common stages in cultural adaptation, some people experience them in a different order, or may miss a stage altogether. Members of the same family may experience culture shock at different times, which can cause friction or conflict between spouses, or between parents and children.

Identifying Culture Shock

People may experience culture shock when forced to adjust to a new culture or sub-culture (i.e. going away to school) where familiar values and expectations no longer apply. Some indicators of this may be accustomed cues and behaviour changes; values are not respected by others; feelings of disorientation, anxiousness, depression, or hostility. New ways are unsatisfactory; and social skills and cues that used to be appropriate no longer work. There is a hopeless feeling that the culture shock may never end.[40]

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[39] en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_shock
[40] Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede. (2002). *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 22

Stages of Culture Shock[41]

- o **Honeymoon**—Arrival in the new culture. Newcomers are excited about their new life. Everything is interesting. It is much like being a tourist—the person's basic identity is still rooted back home.

- o **Disorientation**—Everything familiar is gone. Newcomers are overwhelmed by the requirements of the new culture, being bombarded with stimuli in the new environment.

- o **Mental Isolation/Hostility**—Newcomers experience the difficult reality of daily life in a new culture. Financial and social adjustments make life very difficult. Poor language skills intensify this experience. Newcomers experience a deep sense of loneliness and homesickness. Feelings of self-blame and personal inadequacy emerge. Often newcomers feel angry and resentful toward the new culture for causing difficulties.

- o **Adjustment/Integration**—The first adjustment occurs when newcomers learn language skills and make friends. Newcomers begin to enjoy new cultural experiences, responding to new cues and increasing their ability to function in the new culture. At this point, newcomers see the bad and good elements of both cultures.

- o **Biculturality**—In this stage the newcomer has become fluently comfortable in both the old and the new culture. There is some controversy about whether anyone can really attain this stage.[42]

How We Can Help

Helping newcomers cope with the daily difficulties of settling into a new home and managing daily life is an important way to provide support. Things like finding adequate housing, setting up utilities, getting around town, shopping, finding a family doctor, and enrolling kids in school are all ways we can help. English classes are important because knowing the language helps them organize and manage daily life. This provides positive feelings of accomplishment amid all the difficulties of resettlement. Culture shock cannot be avoided. But we can help by providing practical assistance and friendly support.

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[41] ibid. p. 22

[42] Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede. (2002). *Exploring Culture*. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press. p. 22

EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Our own culture determines how we express ourselves and relate to other people. Our culture defines whom we see as *us* and *them*. Setting aside our cultural biases is not easy—it takes time and determination.

The following strategies can serve as a starting point.

1. **Treat all the people you work with as individuals**. Try to look beyond the cultural background and see the individual.

2. **Respect personal names.** Call people by the name they want to be called. Learn the correct way to pronounce it, the correct order to say it, and the appropriate titles of respect.

3. **Turn fear into curiosity.** We are often taught to be suspicious of other groups. Ask yourself, "What if we could get beyond our differences? What would I learn?"

4. **Avoid generalizing** about a group of people based on one or two members. Just because one member of a group is a computer whiz, does not mean all members of the group are.

5. **Try to be open to new information** about a culture or group of people. We tend to ignore information that does not agree with our view of the world.

6. **Do not assume** that because a person is good or bad at one thing, that they are also good or bad at other things. For example, do not assume that someone who speaks English poorly also does other things poorly.

7. **Do not play favourites or treat others unfairly.** It is normal to feel a little uncomfortable when you are dealing with someone from another culture; do not let your discomfort cause you to treat that person differently.

8. **Notice the economic and social dividing lines** in your organization and community. If you are on the privileged side of the line, be sensitive to the needs and feelings of those who are not.

9. **Use acceptable terms for cultural groups.** Find out which terms are acceptable to a cultural group and which are not. Speak up if others use terms that are not acceptable to you. Let them know what you would like your group to be called.

10. **Avoid making judgments** based on the accent, timing, or pace of someone's speech. Different ways of speaking may strike you as too haughty or too subservient, or even insulting. Try to view the person objectively.

11. **Laugh with people, not at them.** Never tell ethnic jokes or sexual jokes. If you are offended by a joke told by someone else, tell the person later in private. Or simply say "Ouch! That hurts!" to let the person know that your cultural toes have been stepped on.

12. **Expect to explain cultural unwritten rules.** People from cultures other than your own will not be able to read between the lines. Explain cultural expectations even if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

13. **Find out how disagreements are handled in the other person's culture.** It may be considered unacceptable to say "No" directly, or "No" may simply mean that further negotiation is expected. Avoid public displays of anger.

14. **Pay attention to gestures**. Be careful about the gestures you use and how they might be interpreted. If you are puzzled by someone else's gestures, ask questions. Tell people if they are using inappropriate gestures in a way that does not make them *lose face*.

15. **Adjust your personal space requirements** if necessary. People in different cultures may feel very uncomfortable if you stand too close or too far away (by *their* standards). Notice how closely they stand after they approach you.

16. **Be very careful about touching in *any way*.** Watch what other people do, especially when they are with people of their own culture. Usually people do unto others what they will accept from others—except when there is a difference in status or authority.

Changing Attitude Takes Time

o Changing your attitude and behaviour takes time so <u>do not give up</u> on yourself.

o Monitor your thinking. If someone's words or behaviour cause you anger, embarrassment or stress, acknowledge the emotion. Ask yourself why you feel that way. Is it possible that this is normal cultural behaviour for them and not a personal attack on you? Try to figure it out and turn it into a positive learning experience if you can.

o Laugh *at* yourself; laugh *with* others.

The following paraphrase contains some advice from Duane Elmer:

o Let your thoughts be guided by the positive, the good, and the constructive—resisting the tendency to blame and fault others.

o Let your speech be guided by words of grace and sensitivity—resisting the harsh and judgmental.

o Let your actions be guided by acts of love, gentleness, and kindness—resisting the sharp and the abrasive.

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INFORMATION ABOUT SPECIFIC CULTURES

Centre for Intercultural Learning (Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada)—intercultures.ca

This is a federal government website providing information on 211 countries (e.g., history, geography, culture, politics, economy, media). For selected countries, cultural interpreters provide local and Canadian perspectives on topics such as conversations, communication styles, religion, class, ethnicity, gender, hierarchy, decision-making, and stereotypes; as well, recommended books, films, and foods.

Culture Grams—calgarylibrary.ca

Ask the librarian for help finding books with detailed cultural information for different countries.

ADDITIONAL WEBSITES

ATESL—atesl.ca

NorQuest College Edmonton—norquest.ca

YouTube—Search "Cultural Diversity" and "Cultural Awareness" on YouTube. Be sure you view it carefully before showing it to a class—humour with sensitivity is required, and quality of information varies quite a bit.

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