9.1: Intercultural Friendships

Intercultural Communication and Relationships

In this era of globalization, people are traveling across geographical, national, and cultural boundaries as never before. For many, establishing relationships with persons different from ourselves can be challenging and rewarding. How do you get to know them? Should you treat those relationships differently than same culture relationships? Does society influence these new relationships? Learning new customs and traditions can be fun and exciting, but also force us to identify what we think we know about ourselves along with our prejudices and fears. Relationships are hard work, and require constant upkeep to combat the challenges that threaten them. It’s no exaggeration to say that we develop and maintain relationships through communication. What you say and what you do becomes part of the relationship. Incorrect interpretations of messages can lead to misunderstanding, uncertainty, frustration, and conflict, but the potential rewards include gaining new cultural knowledge, broadening one’s worldview, and breaking stereotypes (Sias et al., 2008). This chapter will help you gain a better understanding of what to expect when interacting with people that are culturally different from yourself. We will explore the benefits and challenges of intercultural relationships, discuss the different kinds of intercultural relationships, and encourage you with strategies to build solid intercultural relationships.

Benefits of Intercultural Relationships

Increasing Cultural Knowledge

The benefits of intercultural relationships span differences in gender, age, ethnicity, race, class, nationality, religion, and much more. The moment you begin an intercultural relationship, is the moment you begin to learn more about the world.
You will start experiencing new foods, listen to new music, learn a new game, practice a new sport, acquire new words or a new dialect, or read new literature that you might never had access to before. In some ways you gain a new “history” as you learn what it means to belong to a new cultural group. Hearing a friend or family member describing their lived experience or stories is often much more compelling or “real” than knowledge gained in school or on television.

### Learning New Skills

The difficulties involved in intercultural relationships may help you acquire new skills. According to Docan-Morgan (2015), the skills we develop in all relationships are exaggerated in intercultural relationships. Our diverse friends and loved ones teach us much about the world that we have yet to explore. Docan-Morgan postulates that our newfound understanding of one culture will likely make it easier to relate and to feel close to people from many different walks of life. In other words, our intercultural relationships result in new insights and new ways of thinking that we can apply to every relationship.

![Learning how to make Argan Oil in Morocco.](Image)

### Challenging Previously Held Stereotypes

Intercultural relationships also help us rethink stereotypes we might hold. Martin and Nakayama (2014) point out that the differences we perceive with our partners tend to be more noticeable in the early stages of the relationship. Because these differences can seem overwhelming, the challenge is to discover the things both partners have in common and build on those similarities to strengthen the relationship. The suffering that one or both partners have gone through at the hands of prejudice can be addressed, and a healing effect can grow and thrive as relational partners learn that their prejudices have little to do with the thriving relationship being built.

### Challenges in Intercultural Relationships
Perceived Differences

While intercultural relationships can enrich our lives and provide life-changing benefits, they can also present several challenges. The dialectics discussed in Chapter 2 affect our intercultural relationships. The similarities-differences dialectic in particular may present challenges to relationship formation (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). While differences between people’s cultural identities may be obvious, it takes some effort to uncover commonalities that can form the basis of a relationship. Perceived differences in general also create anxiety and uncertainty that is not as present in intracultural relationships. People experience anxiety or fear about the possible negative consequences of their actions or from being uncertain how to act towards a person from a different culture. Some form of anxiety always exists in the early stages of any relationship, but being worried about offending someone or looking incompetent is more pronounced in intercultural relationships. The level of anxiety may even be higher if people have previous negative experiences. Once some similarities are found, the tension within the dialectic begins to balance out and uncertainty and anxiety lessen.

Motivation

In order to build a relationship across cultural boundaries, there has to be motivation, as intercultural relationships take more work to nurture and maintain. One must explain values, beliefs and behaviors to ourselves, to each other, and to our communities. Every difference, and similarity, must be explored. What does a friendship look like? What are the expectations? What does a romantic relationship look like? Who must approve the relationship? Why would we want to be friends? What taboos exist within the culture? How can we manage the potential questioning or even backlash from our own cultural group? This type of explaining requires time, effort, and patience and may be an extra burden that some are not willing to carry.

Negative Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes are powerful, and often take a conscious effort to detect. They can hinder progress toward relational development, especially if the individuals are not open to adjusting their preexisting beliefs. Pathstone Mental Health (2017) suggests seven important things we can do to reduce stereotyping and discrimination within relationships.

- Know the facts.
- Be aware of your attitudes and behavior.
- Choose your words carefully.
- Educate others.
- Focus on the positive.
- Support people.
- Include everyone.

It’s not impossible for an intercultural relationship to work out. What’s critical is to affirm the other person’s cultural identity. We need to recognize that the other person might have different values, beliefs, and behaviors which form both their individual and cultural identities. This requires being open-minded, being interested, being respectful, realizing the similarities, avoiding making assumptions, and celebrating the differences. Intercultural relationships have real challenges, but if things work out, they can be amazing.
Common Types of Intercultural Relationships

Intercultural relationships are formed between people with different cultural identities and include romantic partners, friends, family, and coworkers. Although the term "relationship" is often associated with romance, intercultural relationships can be as varied as the people within them. Colleagues performing a work-related task can develop a friendship. Marrying into a family creates strong familial ties. Eating at the same family-run restaurant each week builds loyalty. This section will explore two of the most common types of intercultural relationships: friendships and romantic relationships.

Intercultural Friendships

Friendship is a unique and important type of interpersonal relationship that constitutes a significant portion of a person’s social life from early childhood all the way through to late adulthood (Rawlins, 1992). Friendship is distinguished from other types of relationships by its “voluntary” nature. In other words, friendship occurs when individuals are relatively free from obligatory ties, duties, and other expectations (Fischer (1975). One can begin or end a friendship as desired.

Individualism and Collectivism in Intercultural Friendships

Notions about friendship and the idea of what constitutes a friend varies from culture to culture, with significant differences rooted in the values of individualism and collectivism. People who tend to be individualistic often view friendship as a voluntary decision that is more spontaneous and focused on individual goals that might be gained by befriending a particular person. Such goals might include practicing language skills or learning to cook culinary specialties. On the other hand, collectivists may have more obligatory views of friendship. They may see it as a long-term obligation that involves mutual gain such as help with gaining a visa or somewhere to stay during vacations (Wahl & Scholl, 2014). In the United States, the term “friend” is a fairly broad term that applies to many different kinds of relationships. In Eastern European countries, for example, the term “friend” is used in a much more narrow context. What many cultures in the world consider a “friend,” an American would consider a “close friend” (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Following individualistic tendencies, Americans often form relationships quickly, and can come across as informal, forward, intrusive, and superficial (Triandis, 1995). Collectivistic Asian cultures place more emphasis on indirect communication patterns and more stress on maintaining social relationships, sincerity and spirituality (Barnlund, 1989; Yum, 1988).

Friendship and Cultural Complexity

Intercultural friendship can be difficult to initiate, develop, and maintain, but that is not to say that different cultures cannot have similar views on friendship. Various cultures can value the same things, such as honesty and trustworthiness, but simply prioritize them differently (Barnlund, 1989). Researchers have found a wide range of important friendship variables such as values, interest, personality traits, network patterns, communication styles, cultural knowledge, relational competence, and intergroup attitudes that impact intercultural friendship formation (Aberson, Shoemaker & Tomolillo, 2004; Collier & Mahoney, 1996; Gareis, 1995; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1979; Mcdermott, 1992; Olanrian, 1996; Yamaguchi & Wiseman, 2003; Zimmermann, 1995). Even within the United States, views of friendship vary based on cultural identities. Research on friendship has shown that Latinx Americans value...
relational support and positive feedback, Asian Americans emphasize exchanges of ideas like offering feedback or asking for guidance, African Americans value respect and mutual acceptance, and European Americans value recognition of each other as individuals (Coller, 1996).

Intercultural friendship formation may face challenges that other friendships do not. Prior intercultural experience and overcoming language barriers increase the likelihood of intercultural friendship formation (Sias et al., 2008). In some cases, previous intercultural experience, like studying abroad in college or living in a diverse place, may motivate someone to pursue intercultural friendships once they are no longer in that context. When friendships cross nationality, it may be necessary to invest more time in common understanding, due to language barriers. With sufficient motivation and language skills, communication exchanges through self-disclosure can then further relational formation. Research has shown that individuals from different countries in intercultural friendships differ in terms of the topics and depth of self-disclosure, but that as the friendship progresses, self-disclosure increases in depth and breadth (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009). Further, as people overcome initial challenges to initiating an intercultural friendship and move toward mutual self-disclosure, the relationship becomes more intimate, which helps friends work through and move beyond their cultural differences to focus on maintaining their relationship. In this sense, intercultural friendships can be just as strong and enduring as other friendships (Lee, 2006).

Intriguing research from Sias et al. (2008) indicate that cultural differences can enhance, rather than hinder, friendship development. Cultural differences enhanced friendship development because the participants found those differences interesting and exciting. Those who overcame the challenges of language differences were able to develop rich friendships often with a unique vocabulary that included words created from a mixture of both languages. An example of this could be “Spanglish” which is a mixture of Spanish and English or “Chinglish” which is a mixture of Chinese and English. This idiosyncratic language seemed to strengthen the bond between the friends (Sias et al., 2008; Casmir, 1999; Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

The potential for broadening one’s perspective and learning more about cultural identities is not always balanced, however. In some instances, members of a dominant culture may be more interested in sharing their culture with their intercultural friend than they are in learning about their friend’s culture, which illustrates how context and power influence friendships (Lee, 2006). A research study found a similar power dynamic, as European Americans in intercultural friendships stated they were open to exploring everyone’s culture but also communicated that culture wasn’t a big part of their intercultural friendships, as they just saw their friends as people. As the researcher states, “These types of responses may demonstrate that it is easiest for the group with the most socioeconomic and socio-cultural power to ignore the rules, assume they have the power as individuals to change the rules, or assume that no rules exist, since others are adapting to them rather than vice versa” (Collier, 1996). Again, intercultural friendships illustrate the complexity of culture and the importance of remaining mindful of your communication and the contexts in which it occurs.

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