5.1: Intercultural Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Define and discuss how to facilitate intercultural communication
2. Define and discuss the effects of ethnocentrism

Communication is the sharing of understanding and meaning, Pearson, J., & Nelson, P. (2000). *An introduction to human communication: understanding and sharing*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill. But what is intercultural communication? If you answered, “the sharing of understanding and meaning across cultures,” you’d be close, but the definition requires more attention. What is a culture? Where does one culture stop and another start? How are cultures created, maintained, and dissolved? Klopf, D. (1991). *Intercultural encounters: the fundamentals of intercultural communication* (2nd ed.). Inglewood, CA: Morton Publishing Company. Described culture as “that part of the environment made by humans.” From the building we erect that represents design values to the fences we install that delineate borders, our environment is a representation of culture, but it is not all that is culture.

Culture involves beliefs, attitudes, values, and traditions that are shared by a group of people. Thus, we must consider more than the clothes we wear, the movies we watch, or the video games we play, all representations of environment, as culture. Culture also involves the psychological aspects of our expectations of the communication context. For example, if we are raised in a culture where males speak while females are expected to remain silent, the context of the communication interaction governs behavior, itself a representation of culture. From the choice of words (message), to how we communicate (in person, or by email), to how we acknowledge understanding with a nod or a glance (nonverbal feedback), to the internal and external interference, all aspects of communication are influenced by culture.

In defining intercultural communication, we only have eight components of communication to work with, and yet we must bridge divergent cultures with distinct values across languages and time zones to exchange value, a representation of meaning. It may be tempting to consider only the source and receiver within a transaction as a representation of
intercultural communication, but if we do that, we miss the other six components—the message, channel, feedback, context, environment, and interference—in every communicative act. Each component influences and is influenced by culture. Is culture context? Environment? Message? Culture is represented in all eight components every time we communicate. All communication is intercultural.

We may be tempted to think of intercultural communication as interaction between two people from different countries. While two distinct national passports may be artifacts, or nonverbal representations of communication, what happens when two people from two different parts of the same country communicate? From high and low Germanic dialects, to the perspective of a Southerner versus a Northerner in the United States, to the rural versus urban dynamic, our geographic, linguistic, educational, sociological, and psychological traits influence our communication.

It is not enough to say that someone from rural Southern Chile and the capital, Santiago, both speak Castellano (the Chilean word for the Spanish language), so that communication between them must be intracultural communication, or communication within the same culture. What is life like for the rural Southerner? For the city dweller? Were their educational experiences the same? Do they share the same vocabulary? Do they value the same things? To a city dweller, all the sheep look the same. To the rural Southerner, the sheep are distinct, with unique markings; they have value as a food source, a source of wool with which to create sweaters and socks that keep the cold winters at bay, and, in their numbers, they represent wealth. Even if both Chileans speak the same language, their socialization will influence how they communicate and what they value, and their vocabulary will reflect these differences.

Let’s take this intra-national comparison one step further. Within the same family, can there be intercultural communication? If all communication is intercultural, then the answer would be yes, but we still have to prove our case. Imagine a three-generation family living in one house. The grandparents may represent another time, and different values, from the grandchildren. The parents may have a different level of education and pursue different careers from the grandparents; the schooling the children are receiving may prepare them for yet another career. From music, to food preferences, to how work is done may vary across time; Elvis Presley may seem like ancient history to the children. The communication across generations represents intercultural communication, even if only to a limited degree.

But suppose we have a group of students who are all similar in age and educational level. Do gender and the societal expectations of roles influence interaction? Of course. And so we see that, among these students, the boys and girls not only communicate in distinct ways, but not all boys and girls are the same. With a group of sisters, there may be common characteristics, but they will still have differences, and these differences contribute to intercultural communication. We are each shaped by our upbringing and it influences our world view, what we value, and how we interact with each other. We create culture, and it creates us.

Rogers and Steinfatt. Rogers, E., & Steinfatt, T. (1999). Intercultural communication. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. define intercultural communication as the exchange of information between individuals who are “unlike culturally.” If you follow our discussion and its implications, you may arrive at the idea that ultimately we are each a “culture of one”—we are simultaneously a part of community and its culture(s), and separate from it in the unique combination that represents us as an individual. All of us are separated by a matter of degrees from each other even if we were raised on the same street, by parents of similar educational background and profession, and have many other things in common.

Communication with yourself is called intrapersonal communication, and it may also be intracultural, as you may only
represent one culture, but most people belong to many groups, each with their own culture. Within our imaginary
tergenerational home, how many cultures do you think we might find? If we only consider the parents, and consider
work one culture, and family another, we now have two. If we were to examine the options more closely, we would find
many more groups, and the complexity would grow exponentially. Does a conversation with yourself ever involve
competing goals, objectives, needs, wants, or values? How did you learn of those goals, or values? Through
communication within and between individuals, they themselves representatives of many cultures. We struggle with the
demands of each group, and their expectations, and could consider this internal struggle intercultural conflict, or simply
intercultural communication.

Culture is part of the very fabric of our thought, and we cannot separate ourselves from it, even as we leave home,
defining ourselves anew in work and achievement. Every business or organization has a culture, and within what may
be considered a global culture, there are many subcultures or co-cultures. For example, consider the difference between
the sales and accounting departments in a corporation: we can quickly see two distinct groups, with their own symbols,
vocabulary, and values. Within each group there may also be smaller groups, and each member of each department
comes from a distinct background that in itself influences behavior and interaction.

Intercultural communication is a fascinating area of study within group or organizational communication, and essential to
your success. One idea to keep in mind as we examine this topic is the importance of considering multiple points of
view. If you tend to dismiss ideas or views that are “unalike culturally,” you will find it challenging to learn about diverse
cultures. If you cannot learn, how can you grow and be successful?

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to view other cultures as inferior to one’s own. Having pride in your culture can be
healthy, but history has taught us that having a predisposition to discount other cultures simply because they are
different can be hurtful, damaging, and dangerous. Ethnocentrism makes us far less likely to be able to bridge the gap
with others and often increases intolerance of difference. Business and industry are no longer regional, and in your
career, you will necessarily cross borders, languages, and cultures. You will need tolerance, understanding, patience,
and openness to difference. A skilled communicator knows that the process of learning is never complete, and being
open to new ideas is a key strategy for success.

Key Takeaways

- Intercultural communication is an aspect of all communicative interactions, and attention to your own perspective is
  key to your effectiveness.
- Ethnocentrism is a major obstacle to intercultural communication.

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

1. Please list five words to describe your dominant culture. Please list five words to describe a culture with which you
   are not a member, have little or no contact, or have limited knowledge. Now compare and contrast the terms
   noting their inherent value statements.
2. Identify a country you would like to visit. Research the country and find one interesting business fact and share it
   with the class.
3. Write a brief summary about a city, region, state, or country you have visited that is not like where you live. Share
   and compare with classmates.