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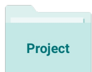

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Communicating across Cultural Barriers

Nancy J. Adler

> *If we seek to understand a people, we have to try to put ourselves, as far as we can, in that particular historical and cultural background. ... It is not easy for a person of one country to enter into the background of another country. So there is great irritation, because one fact that seems obvious to us is not immediately accepted by the other party or does not seem obvious to him at all. ... But that extreme irritation will go when we think ... that he is just differently conditioned and simply can't get out of that condition. One has to recognize that whatever the future may hold, countries and people differ ... in their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. In order to understand them, we have to understand their way of life and approach. If we wish to convince them, we have to use their language as far as we can, not language in the narrow sense of the word, but the language of the mind. That is one necessity. Something that goes even much further than that is not the appeal to logic and reason, but some kind of emotional awareness of other people. ...*
>
> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Visit to America*

All international business activity involves communication. Within the international and global business environment, activities such as exchanging information and ideas, decision making, negotiating, motivating, and leading are all based on the ability of managers from one culture to communicate successfully with managers and employees from other cultures. Achieving effective communication is a challenge to managers worldwide even when the workforce is culturally homogeneous, but when one company includes a variety of languages and cultural backgrounds, effective two-way communication becomes even more difficult (16:1; 10:3-5, 121-128).

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Communication is the exchange of meaning: it is my attempt to let you know what I mean. Communication includes any behavior that another human being perceives and interprets: it is your understanding of what I mean. Communication includes sending both verbal messages (words) and nonverbal messages (tone of voice, facial expression, behavior, and physical setting). It includes consciously sent messages as well as messages that the sender is totally unaware of sending. Whatever I say and do, I cannot not communicate. Communication therefore involves a complex, multilayered, dynamic process through which we exchange meaning.

Every communication has a message sender and a message receiver. As shown in Figure 3-1, the sent message is never identical to the received message. Why? Communication is indirect; it is a symbolic behavior. Ideas, feelings, and pieces of information cannot be communicated directly but must be externalized or symbolized before being communicated. Encoding describes the producing of a symbol message. Decoding describes the receiving of a message from a symbol. The message sender must encode his or her meaning into a form that the receiver will recognize—that is, into words and behavior. Receivers must then decode the words and behavior—the symbols—back into messages that have meaning for them.

For example, because the Cantonese word for *eight* sounds like *faat*, which means prosperity, a Hong Kong textile manufacturer Mr. Lau Ting-pong paid $5 million in 1988 for car registration number 8. A year later, a European millionaire paid $4.8 million at Hong Kong's Lunar New Year auction for vehicle registration number 7, a decision that mystified the Chinese, since the number 7 has little significance in the Chinese calculation of fortune (20).

Similarly, the prestigious members of Hong Kong's Legislative Council refrained from using numbers ending in 4 to identify their newly installed lockers. Some Chinese consider numbers ending with the digit 4 to be jinxed, because the sound of the Cantonese word *sei* is the same for four and death. The number 24, for instance, sounds like yee sei, or death-prone in Cantonese (9).

SOURCE: Adler, N.J. 1991. *International Dimensions of Oganizational Behavior (2nd ed.)*. Boston, MA: PWS-KENT Publishing Company. pp. 63-91.

Translating meanings into words and behaviors—that is, into symbols—and back again into meanings is based on a person's cultural background and is not the same for each person. The greater the difference in background between senders and receivers, the greater the difference in meanings attached to particular words and behaviors. For example:

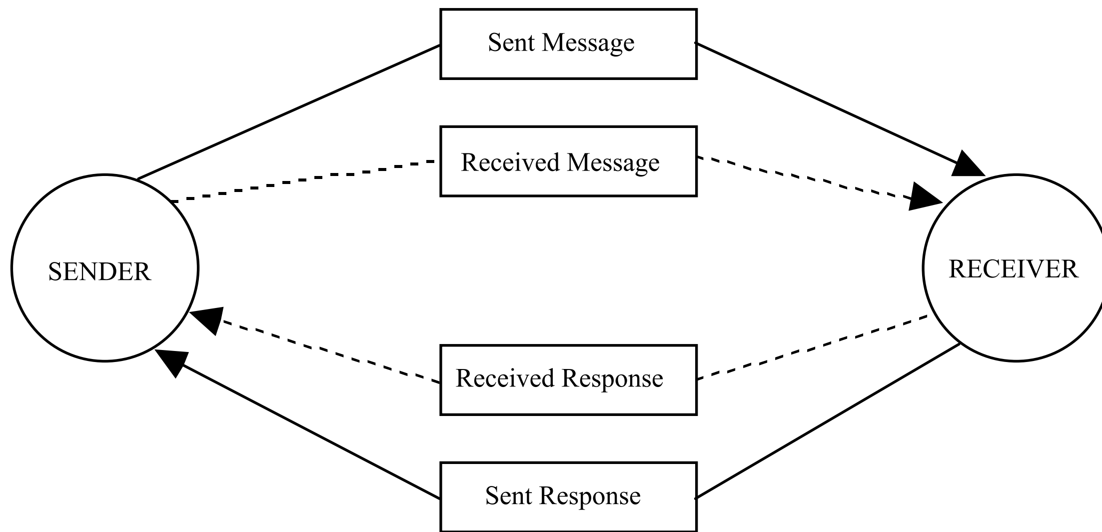

FIGURE 3-1 Communication Model

> A British boss asked a new, young American employee if he would like to have an early lunch at 11 A.M. each day. The employee answered, "Yeah, that would be great!" The boss, hearing the word yeah instead of the word yes, assumed that the employee was rude, ill-mannered, and disrespectful. The boss responded with a curt, "With that kind of attitude, you may as well forget about lunch!" The employee was bewildered. What had gone wrong? In the process of encoding agreement (the meaning) into yeah (a word symbol) and decoding the yeah spoken by a new employee to the boss (a word, behavior, and context symbol), the boss received an entirely different message than the employee had meant to send. Unfortunately, as is the case in most miscommunication, neither the sender nor the receiver was fully aware of what had gone wrong and why.

Cross-cultural communication occurs when a person from one culture sends a message to a person from another culture. Cross-cultural miscommunication occurs when the person from the second culture does not receive the sender's intended message. The greater the differences between the sender's and the receiver's cultures, the greater the chance for cross-cultural miscommunication. For example:

> A Japanese businessman wants to tell his Norwegian client that he is uninterested in a particular sale. To be polite, the Japanese says, "That will be very difficult." The Norwegian interprets the statement to mean that there are still unresolved problems, not that the deal is off. He responds by asking how his company can help solve the problems. The Japanese, believing he has sent the message that there will be no sale, is mystified by the response.

Communication does not necessarily result in understanding. Cross-cultural communication continually involves misunderstanding caused by misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation. When the sender of a message comes from one culture and the receiver from another, the chances of accurately transmitting a message are low. Foreigners see, interpret, and evaluate things differently, and consequently act upon them differently. In approaching cross-cultural situations, one should therefore assume difference until similarity is proven. It is also important to recognize that all behavior makes sense through the eyes of the person behaving and that logic and rationale are culturally relative. In cross-cultural situations, labeling behavior as bizarre

usually reflects culturally based misperception, misinterpretation, and misevaluation; rarely does it reflect intentional malice or pathologically motivated behavior.

Culturally Bizarre' Behavior:

Only in the Eyes of the Beholder

While in Thailand a Canadian expatriate's car was hit by a Thai motorist who had crossed over the double line while passing another vehicle. After failing to establish that the fault lay with the Thai driver, the Canadian flagged down a policeman. After several minutes of seemingly futile discussion, the Canadian pointed out the double line in the middle of the road and asked the policeman directly, "What do these lines signify?" The policeman replied, "They indicate the center of the road and are there so I can establish just how far the accident is from that point." The Canadian was silent. It had never occurred to him that the double line might not mean "no passing allowed."

Unwritten rules reflect a culture's interpretation of its surroundings. A foreign columnist for the English-language *Bangkok Post* once proclaimed that the unwritten traffic rule in Thailand is: "When there are more than three cars in front of you at a stop sign or intersection, start your own line!" This contravenes the Western stay-in-line ethic, of course, but it effectively portrays, albeit in slightly exaggerated fashion, a fairly consistent form of behavior at intersections in Thailand. And it drives non-Thais crazy!(l4)

CROSS-CULTURAL MISPERCEPTION

Do the French and the Chinese see the world in the same way? No. Do Venezuelans and Ghanaians see the world in the same way? Again, no.

No two national groups see the world in exactly the same way. Perception is the process by which each individual selects, organizes, and evaluates stimuli from the external environment to provide meaningful experiences for himself or herself (2;12;16;18). For example, when Mexican children simultaneously viewed tachistoscopic pictures of a bullfight and a baseball game, they only remembered seeing the bullfight. Looking through the same tachistoscope, American children only remembered seeing the baseball game (3). Similarly, adult card players, when shown cards by researchers, failed to see black hearts and diamonds, or red clubs and spades.

Why didn't the children see both pictures? Why did the adults fail to see the unexpected playing card colors? The answer lies in the nature of perception. Perceptual patterns are neither innate nor absolute. They are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent, and inaccurate.

- Perception is *selective*. At any one time there are too many stimuli in the environment for us to observe. Therefore, we screen out most of what we see, hear, taste, and feel. We screen out the overload (5) and allow only selected information through our perceptual screen to our conscious mind.
- Perceptual patterns are *learned*. We are not born seeing the world in one particular way. Our experience teaches us to perceive the world in certain ways.
- Perception is *culturally determined*. We learn to see the world in a certain way based on our cultural background.
- Perception tends to remain *constant*. Once we see something in a particular way, we continue to see it that way.
- *We therefore see things that do not exist, and do not see things that do exist*. Our interests, values, and culture act as filters and lead us to distort, block, and even create what we choose to see and hear. We perceive what we expect to perceive. We perceive things according to what we have been trained to see, according to our cultural map.

For example, read the following sentence:

> FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT OF YEARS
> OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY COMBINED WITH THE
> EXPERIENCE OF YEARS

Now, quickly count the number of F's in the sentence. Most non-native English speakers see all six F's. Many native English speakers only see three F's, they do not see the F's in the word of because of is not an important word in understanding the sentence. We selectively see those words that are important according to our cultural conditioning (in this case, our linguistic conditioning). Once we see a phenomenon in a particular way, we usually continue to see it in that way. Once we stop seeing of's, we do not see them again (even when we look for them); we do not see things that do exist. One particularly astute manager at Canadian National railways makes daily use of perceptual filters to her firm's advantage. She gives reports written in English to bilingual Francophones to proofread and those written in French to bilingual Anglophones. She uses the fact that the English secretaries can "see" more errors—especially small typographical errors—in French and the French secretaries can "see" more errors in English.

The distorting impact of perceptual filters causes us to see things that do not exist. This phenomenon was powerfully demonstrated a number of years ago in a training session for American executives. The executives were asked to study the picture shown in Figure 3-2 and then describe it to a colleague who had not seen the picture. The first colleague then attempted to describe it to a second colleague who had not seen the picture, and so on. Finally, the fifth colleague described his perception of the picture to the group of executives and compared it with the original picture. Among the numerous distortions, the executives consistently described the black and the white man as fighting; the knife as being in the hands of the black man; and the white man as wearing a business suit and the black man as wearing laborer's overalls. Clearly the (inaccurate) stereotypes of blacks (poorer, working class, and more likely to commit crimes) and of whites (richer, upper class, and less likely to be involved in violent crime) radically altered the executives' perceptions and totally changed the meaning of the picture (1). The executives' perceptual filters allowed them to see things that did not exist and to miss seeing things that did exist.

CROSS-CULTURAL MISINTERPRETATION

Interpretation occurs when an individual gives meaning to observations and their relationships; it is the process of making sense out of perceptions. Interpretation organizes our experience to guide our behavior. Based on our experience, we make assumptions about our perceptions so we will not have to rediscover meanings each time we encounter similar situations. For example, we make assumptions about how doors work, based on our experience of entering and leaving rooms; thus we do not have to relearn each time we have to open a door. Similarly, when we smell smoke, we generally assume there is a fire. We do not have to stop and wonder if the smoke indicates a fire or a flood. Our consistent patterns of interpretation help us to act appropriately and quickly within our day-to-day world.

Categories

Since we are constantly bombarded with more stimuli than we can absorb and more perceptions than we can keep distinct, we only perceive those images that may be meaningful. We group perceived images into familiar categories that help to simplify our environment, become the basis for our interpretations, and allow us to function in an otherwise overly complex world. For example, as a driver approaching an intersection, I may or may not notice the number of children in the back seat of the car next to me, but I will notice whether the traffic

light is red or green (selective perception). If the light is red, I automatically place it in the category of all red traffic signals (categorization). This time, like prior times, I stop (behavior based on interpretation). Although people are capable of distinguishing thousands of different colors, I do not take the time to notice if the red light in Istanbul is brighter or duller than the one in Singapore or more orange or more purple than the one in Nairobi; I just stop. Categorization helps me to distinguish what is most important in my environment and to behave accordingly.

FIGURE 3-2 Impact of Perceptual Filters
SOURCE: Projected picture from experiment on accuracy of communication from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith Rumor Clinic. As shown in Robert Bolton, *People Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1979), p. 74.
Copyright © 1979 by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Categories of perceived images become ineffective when we place people and things in the wrong group. Cross-cultural miscategorization occurs when I use my home country categories to make sense out of foreign situations. For example, a Korean businessman entered a client's office in Stockholm and encountered a woman behind the desk. Assuming that she was a secretary, he announced that he wanted to see Mr. Silferbrand. The woman responded by saying that the secretary would be happy to help him. The Korean became confused. In assuming that most women are secretaries rather than managers, he had misinterpreted the situation and acted inappropriately. His category makes sense because most women in Korean offices are secretaries. But it proved counterproductive since this particular Swedish woman was not a secretary.

Stereotypes

Stereotyping involves a form of categorization that organizes our experience and guides our behavior toward ethnic and national groups. Stereotypes never describe individual behavior; rather, they describe the behavioral

norm for members of a particular group. For example, the stereotypes of English and French businesspeople, as analyzed by Intercultural Management Associates in Paris, are described as follows:

> We have found that to every set of negative stereotypes distinguishing the British and French there corresponds a particular values divergence that, when recognized, can prove an extraordinary resource. To illustrate: The French, in describing the British as "perfidious," "hypocritical," and "vague," are in fact describing the Englishman's typical lack of a general model or theory and his preference for a more pragmatic, evolutionary approach. This fact is hard for the Frenchman to believe, let alone accept as a viable alternative, until, working alongside one another, the French man comes to see that there is usually no ulterior motive behind the Englishman's vagueness but rather a capacity to think aloud and adapt to circumstances. For his part, the Englishman comes to see that, far from being "distant," "superior," or "out of touch with reality," the Frenchman's concern for a general model or theory is what lends vision, focus, and cohesion to an enterprise or project, as well as leadership and much needed authority (7).

Stereotypes, like other forms of categories, can be helpful or harmful depending on how we use them. Effective stereotyping allows people to understand and act appropriately in new situations. A stereotype can be helpful when it is

- *Consciously held*. The person should be aware that he or she is describing a group norm rather than the characteristics of a specific individual.
- *Descriptive* rather than evaluative. The stereotype should describe what people from this group will probably be like and not evaluate those people as good or bad.
- *Accurate*. The stereotype should accurately describe the norm for the group to which the person belongs.
- *The first best guess* about a group prior to having direct information about the specific person or persons involved.
- *Modified*, based on further observation and experience with the actual people and situations.

A subconsciously held stereotype is difficult to modify or discard even after we collect real information about a person, because it is often thought to reflect reality. If a subconscious stereotype also inaccurately evaluates a person or situation, we are likely to maintain an inappropriate, ineffective, and frequently harmful guide to reality. For example, assume that I subconsciously hold the stereotype that Anglophone Quebecois refuse to learn French and that therefore they should have no rights within the province (an inaccurate, evaluative stereotype). I then meet a monolingual Anglophone and say, "See, I told you that Anglophones aren't willing to speak French! They don't deserve to have rights here." I next meet a bilingual Anglophone and conclude, "He must be American because Canadian Anglophones always refuse to learn French." Instead of questioning, modifying, or discarding my stereotype ("Some Anglophone Canadians speak French"), I alter reality to fit the stereotype ("He must be American"). Stereotypes increase effectiveness only when used as a first best guess about a person or situation prior to having direct information. They never help when adhered to rigidly.

Indrei Ratiu (17), in his work with INSEAD (Institut Europeen d'Administration des Affaires—European Institute of Business Administration) and London Business School, found that managers ranked "most internationally effective" by their colleagues altered their stereotypes to fit the actual people involved, whereas managers ranked "least internationally effective" continued to maintain their stereotypes even in the face of contradictory information. For example, internationally effective managers, prior to their first visit to Germany, might stereotype Germans as being extremely task oriented. Upon arriving and meeting a very friendly and lazy Herr Schmidt, they would alter their description to say that most Germans appear extremely task oriented, but Herr Schmidt seems friendly and lazy. Months later, the most internationally effective managers would only be able to say that some Germans appear very task oriented, while others seem quite relationship oriented (friendly); it all depends on the person and the situation. In this instance, the stereotype is used as a first best guess about the group's behavior prior to meeting any individuals from the group. As time goes on, it is modified or discarded entirely; information about each individual supersedes the group stereotype. By contrast, the least internationally effective managers maintain their stereotypes. They assume that the contradictory evidence in Herr Schmidt's case represents an exception, and they continue to believe that all Germans are highly

task oriented. In drawing conclusions too quickly on the basis of insufficient information—premature closure (12)—their stereotypes be come self-fulfilling (19).

Canadian psychologist Donald Taylor (4;5;21) found that most people maintain their stereotypes even in the face of contradictory evidence. Taylor asked English and French Canadians to listen to one of three tape recordings of a French Canadian describing himself. In the first version, the French Canadian used the Francophone stereotype and described himself as religious, proud, sensitive, and expressive. In the second version, he used neutral terms to describe himself. In the third version, he used terms to describe himself that contradicted the stereotype, such as not religious, humble, unexpressive, and conservative. After having listened to one of the three versions, the participants were asked to describe the Francophone on the tape (not Francophones in general). Surprisingly, people who listened to each of the three versions used the same stereotypic terms—religious, proud, sensitive, and expressive—even when the voice on the tape had conveyed the opposite information. People evidently maintain stereotypes even in the face of contradictory information.

To be effective, international managers must therefore be aware of cultural stereotypes and learn to set them aside when faced with contradictory evidence. They cannot pretend not to stereotype.

If stereotyping is so useful as an initial guide to reality, why do people malign it? Why do parents and teachers constantly admonish children not to stereotype? Why do sophisticated managers rarely admit to stereotyping, even though each of us stereotypes every day? The answer is that we have failed to accept stereotyping as a natural process and have consequently failed to learn to use it to our advantage. For years we have viewed stereotyping as a form of primitive thinking, as an unnecessary simplification of reality. We have also viewed stereotyping as immoral: stereotypes can be inappropriate judgments of individuals based on inaccurate descriptions of groups. It is true that labeling people from a certain ethnic group as "bad" is immoral, but grouping individuals into categories is neither good nor bad—it simply reduces a complex reality to manageable dimensions. Negative views of stereotyping simply cloud our ability to understand people's actual behavior and impair our awareness of our own stereotypes. *Everyone* stereotypes.

In conclusion, some people stereotype effectively and others do not. Stereotypes become counterproductive when we place people in the wrong groups, when we incorrectly describe the group norm, when we inappropriately evaluate the group or category, when we confuse the stereotype with the description of a particular individual, and when we fail to modify the stereotype based on our actual observations and experience.

Sources of Misinterpretation

Misinterpretation can be caused by inaccurate perceptions of a person or situation that arise when what actually exists is not seen. It can be caused by an inaccurate interpretation of what is seen; that is, by using my meanings to make sense out of your reality. An example of this type of misinterpretation (or misattribution) comes from an encounter with an Austrian businessman.

> I meet my Austrian client for the sixth time in as many months. He greets me as Herr Smith. Categorizing him as a businessman, I interpret his very formal behavior to mean that he does not like me or is uninterested in developing a closer relationship with me. (North American attribution: people who maintain formal behavior after the first few meetings do so because they dislike or distrust the associates so treated.) In fact, I have misinterpreted his behavior. I have used the norms for North American business behavior, which are more informal and demonstrative (I would say "Good morning, Fritz," not "Good morning, Herr Ranschburg"), to interpret the Austrian's more formal behavior ("Good morning, Herr Smith").

Culture strongly influences, and in many cases determines, our interpretations. Both the categories and the meanings we attach to them are based on our cultural background. Sources of cross-cultural misinterpretation include subconscious cultural "blinders," a lack of cultural self-awareness, projected similarity, and parochialism.

Subconscious Cultural Blinders. Because most interpretation goes on at a subconscious level, we lack awareness of the assumptions we make and their cultural basis. Our home culture reality never forces us to examine our assumptions or the extent to which they are culturally based, because we share our cultural

assumptions with most other citizens of our country. All we know is that things do not work as smoothly or logically when we work outside our own culture as when we work with people more similar to ourselves. For example:

> A Canadian conducting business in Kuwait is surprised when his meeting with a high ranking official is not held in a closed office and is constantly interrupted. Using the Canadian-based cultural assumptions that (a) important people have large private offices with secretaries to monitor the flow of people into the office, and (b) important business takes precedence over less important business and is therefore not interrupted, the Canadian interprets the Kuwaiti's open office and constant interruptions to mean that the official is neither as high ranking nor as interested in conducting the business at hand as he had previously thought. The Canadian's interpretation of the office environment leads him to lose interest in working with the Kuwaiti.

The problem is that the Canadian's interpretation derives from his own North American norms, not from Middle Eastern cultural norms. The Kuwaiti may well have been a high-ranking official who was very interested in doing business. The Canadian will never know.

Cases of subconscious cross-cultural misinterpretation occur frequently. For example a Soviet poet, after lecturing at American universities for two months, said, "Attempts to please an American audience are doomed in advance, because out of twenty listeners five may hold one point of view, seven another, and eight may have none at all" (10). The Soviet poet confused Americans' freedom of thought and speech with his ability to please them. He assumed that one can only please an audience if all members hold the same opinion. Another example of well-meant misinterpretation comes from the United States Office of Education's advice to teachers of newly arrived Vietnamese refugee students (22):

> Students' participation was discouraged in Vietnamese schools by liberal doses of corporal punishment, and students were conditioned to sit rigidly and speak out only when spoken to. This background ... makes speaking freely in class hard for a Vietnamese student. Therefore, don't mistake shyness for apathy.

Perhaps the extent to which this is a culturally based interpretation becomes clearer if we imagine the opposite advice the Vietnamese Ministry of Education might give to Vietnamese teachers receiving American children for the first time.

> Students' proper respect for teachers was discouraged by a loose order and students were conditioned to chat all the time and to behave in other disorderly ways. This background makes proper and respectful behavior in class hard for an American student. Therefore, do not mistake rudeness for lack of reverence.

Lack of Cultural Self-Awareness. Although we think that the major obstacle in international business is in understanding the foreigner, the greater difficulty involves becoming aware of our own cultural conditioning. As anthropologist Edward Hall has explained, "What is known least well, and is therefore in the poorest position to be studied, is what is closest to oneself (8:45)." We are generally least aware of our own cultural characteristics and are quite surprised when we hear foreigners' descriptions of us. For example, many Americans are surprised to discover that they are seen by foreigners as hurried, overly law-abiding, very hard working, extremely explicit, and overly inquisitive (see the example that follows). Many American businesspeople were equally surprised by a Newsweek survey reporting the characteristics most and least frequently associated with Americans (see Table 3-1). Asking a foreign national to describe businesspeople from your country is a powerful way to see yourself as others see you.

Cross-Cultural Awareness

Americans as Others See Them

People from other countries are often puzzled and intrigued by the intricacies and enigmas of American culture. Below is a selection of actual observations by foreigners visiting the United States. As you read them, ask yourself in each case if the observer is accurate, and how you would explain the trait in question.

India "Americans seem to be in a perpetual hurry. Just watch the way they walk down the street. They never allow themselves the leisure to enjoy life; there are too many things to do."

Kenya "Americans appear to us rather distant. They are not really as close to other people—even fellow Americans—as Americans overseas tend to portray. It's almost as if an American says, 'I won't let you get too close to me.' It's like building a wall."

Turkey "Once we were out in a rural area in the middle of nowhere and saw an American come to a stop sign. Though he could see in both directions for miles and no traffic was coming, he still stopped!"

Colombia "The tendency in the United States to think that life is only work hits you in the face. Work seems to be the one type of motivation."

Indonesia "In the United States everything has to be talked about and analyzed. Even the littlest thing has to be 'Why, Why, Why?'. I get a headache from such persistent questions."

Ethiopia "The American is very explicit; he wants a 'yes' or 'no.' If someone tries to speak figuratively, the American is confused."

Iran "The first time ... my [American] professor told me, 'I don't know the answer, I will have to look it up,' I was shocked. I asked myself, 'Why is he teaching me?' In my country a professor would give the wrong answer rather than admit ignorance."[1]

TABLE 3-1 How Others See Americans

Characteristics Most Often Associated with Americans* by the Populations of					
France	Japan	West Germany	Great Britain	Brazil	Mexico
Industrious	Nationalistic	Energetic	Friendly	Intelligent	Industrious
Energetic	Friendly	Inventive	Self-indulgent	Inventive	Intelligent
Inventive	Decisive	Friendly	Energetic	Energetic	Inventive
Decisive	Rude	Sophisticated	Industrious	Industrious	Decisive
Friendly	Self-indulgent	Intelligent	Nationalistic	Greedy	Greedy
Characteristics Most Often Associated with Americans* by the Same Populations					
Lazy	Industrious	Lazy	Lazy	Lazy	Lazy
Rude	Lazy	Sexy	Sophisticated	Self-indulgent	Honest
Honest	Honest	Greedy	Sexy	Sexy	Rude
Sophisticated	Sexy	Rude	Decisive	Sophisticated	Sexy

SOURCE: Newsweek (July 11, 1983), p. 50, copyright © 1981 by Newsweek, Inc. All rights reserved, reprinted by permission.
*From a list of fourteen characteristics.

Another very revealing way to understand the norms and values of a culture involves listening to common sayings and proverbs. What does a society recommend, and what does it avoid? Following is a list of a number of the most common North American proverbs and the values each teaches.

North American Values: Proverbs

It is evidently much more potent in teaching practicality, for example, to say, "Don't cry over spilt milk" than, "You'd better learn to be practical." North Americans have heard this axiom hundreds of times, and it has made its point. Listed below are North American proverbs on the left and the values they seem to be teaching on the right.[2]

Proverb	Value
Cleanliness is next to godliness.	Cleanliness
A penny saved is a penny earned.	Thriftiness
Time is money.	Time Thriftiness
Don't cry over spilt milk.	Practicality
Waste not; want not.	Frugality
Early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy and wise.	Diligence; Work Ethic
God helps those who help themselves.	Initiative
It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.	Good Sportsmanship
A man's home is his castle.	Privacy; Value of Personal Property
No rest for the wicked.	Guilt; Work Ethic
You've made your bed, now sleep in it.	Responsibility
Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.	Practicality
A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.	Practicality
The squeaky wheel gets the grease.	Aggressiveness
Might makes right.	Superiority of Physical Power
There's more than one way to skin a cat.	Originality; Determination
A stitch in time saves nine.	Timeliness of Action
All that glitters is not gold.	Wariness
Clothes make the man.	Concern of Physical Appearance
If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.	Persistence; Work Ethic
Take care of today, and tomorrow will take care of itself.	Preparation of Future
Laugh, and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone.	Pleasant Outward Appearance

To the extent that we can begin to see ourselves clearly through the eyes of foreigners, we can begin to modify our behavior, emphasizing our most appropriate and effective characteristics and minimizing those least

helpful. To the extent that we are culturally self-aware, we can begin to predict the effect our behavior will have on others.

Projected Similarity. Projected similarity refers to the assumption that people are more similar to you than they actually are, or that a situation is more similar to yours when in fact it is not. Projecting similarity reflects both a natural and a common process. American researchers Burger and Bass (6) worked with groups of managers from fourteen different countries. They asked each manager to describe the work and life goals of a colleague from another country. As shown in Figure 3-3, in every case the managers assumed that their foreign colleagues were more like themselves than they actually were. Projected similarity involves assuming, imagining, and actually perceiving similarity when differences exist. Projected similarity particularly handicaps people in cross-cultural situations. As a South African, I assume that my Greek colleague is more South African than he actually is. As an Egyptian, I assume that my Chilean colleague is more similar to me than she actually is. When I act based on this assumed similarity, I often find that I have acted inappropriately and thus ineffectively.

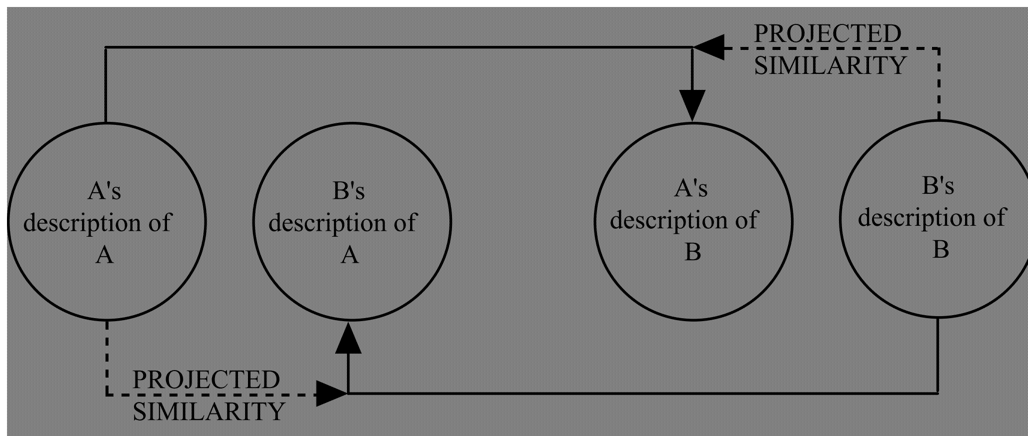

FIGURE 3-3 Projected Similarity

At the base of projected similarity is a subconscious parochialism. I assume that there is only one way to be: my way. I assume that there is only one way to see the world: my way. I therefore view other people in reference to me and to my way of viewing the world. People may fall into an

> illusion of understanding while being unaware of ... [their] misunderstandings. "I understand you perfectly but you don't understand me" is an expression typical of such a situation. Or all communicating parties may fall into a collective illusion of mutual understanding. In such a situation, each party may wonder later why other parties do not live up to the "agreement" they had reached (13:3).

Most international managers do not see themselves as parochial. They believe that as world travelers they are able to see the foreigner's point of view. This is not always true.

EXAMPLE

> When a Danish manager works with a Saudi and the Saudi states that the plant will be completed on time, "En shah allah" ("If God is willing"), the Dane rarely believes that God's will is really going to influence the construction progress. He continues to see the world from his parochial Danish perspective and assumes that "En shah allah" is just an excuse for not getting the work done, or is meaningless altogether.
>
> Similarly, when Balinese workers' families refuse to use birth control methods, explaining that it will break the cycle of reincarnation, few Western managers really consider that there is a possibility that they too

will be reborn a number of times. Instead, they assume that the Balinese do not understand or are afraid of Western medicine.

While it is important to understand and respect the foreigner's point of view, it is not necessary to accept or adopt it. A rigid adherence to our own belief system is a form of parochialism, and parochialism underlies projected similarity.

One of the best exercises for developing empathy and reducing parochialism and projected similarity is role reversal. Imagine that you are a foreign businessperson. Imagine the type of family you come from, the number of brothers and sisters you have, the social and economic conditions you grew up with, the type of education you received, the ways in which you chose your profession and position, the ways in which you were introduced to your spouse, your goals in working for your organization, and your life goals. Asking these questions forces you to see the other person as he or she really is, and not as a mere reflection of yourself. It forces you to see both the similarities and the differences, and not to imagine similarities when differences actually exist. More over, role reversal encourages highly task-oriented businesspeople, such as Americans, to see the foreigner as a whole person rather than someone with a position and a set of skills needed to accomplish a particular task.

CROSS-CULTURAL MISEVALUATION

Even more than perception and interpretation, cultural conditioning strongly affects evaluation. Evaluation involves judging whether someone or something is good or bad. Cross-culturally, we use our own culture as a standard of measurement, judging that which is like our own culture as normal and good and that which is different as abnormal and bad. Our own culture becomes a self-reference criterion: since no other culture is identical to our own, we judge all other cultures as inferior. Evaluation rarely helps in trying to understand or communicate with people from another culture. The consequences of misevaluation are exemplified in the following:

> A Swiss executive waits more than an hour past the appointed time for his Latin colleague to arrive and sign a supply contract. In his impatience, he concludes that Latins must be lazy and totally unconcerned about business. He has misevaluated his colleague by negatively comparing him to his own cultural standards. Implicitly, he has labeled his own group's behavior as good (Swiss arrive on time and that is good) and the other group's behavior as bad (Latins do not arrive on time and that is bad).

COMMUNICATION: GETTING THEIR MEANING, NOT JUST THEIR WORDS

Effective cross-cultural communication is possible, but international managers cannot approach it in the same way as do domestic managers. First, effective international managers "know that they don't know." They assume difference until similarity is proven rather than assuming similarity until difference is proven.

Second, in attempting to understand their foreign colleagues, effective international managers emphasize description, by observing what is actually said and done, rather than interpreting or evaluating it. Describing a situation is the most accurate way to gather information about it. Interpretation and evaluation, unlike description, are based more on the observer's culture and background than on the observed situation. To that extent, my interpretations and evaluations tell me more about myself than about the situation. Although managers, as decision makers, must evaluate people (e.g., performance appraisals) and situations (e.g., project assessments) in terms of organizational standards and objectives, effective international managers delay judgment until they have had sufficient time to observe and interpret the situation from the perspective of all cultures involved.

Third, when attempting to understand or interpret a foreign situation, effective international managers try to see it through the eyes of their foreign colleagues. This role reversal limits the myopia of viewing situations strictly from one's own perspective.

Fourth, once effective international managers develop an explanation for a situation, they treat the explanation as a guess (as a hypothesis to be tested) and not as a certainty. They systematically check with other

foreign and home country colleagues to make sure that their guesses—their interpretations—are plausible. This checking process allows them to converge meanings—to delay accepting their interpretations of the situation until they have confirmed them with others.

Understanding: Converging Meanings

There are many ways to increase the chances for accurately understanding foreigners. The excerpt that follows suggests what to do when business colleagues are not native speakers of your language. Each technique is based on presenting the message through multiple channels (for example, stating your position and showing a graph to summarize the same position), paraphrasing to check if the foreigner has understood your meaning (and not just your words), and converging meanings (always double-checking with a second person that you communicated what you intended).

What Do I Do If They Do Not Speak My Language?

VERBAL BEHAVIOR

- Clear, slow speech. Enunciate each word. Do not use colloquial expressions.
- Repetition. Repeat each important idea using different words to explain the same concept.
- Simple sentences. Avoid compound, long sentences.
- Active verbs. Avoid passive verbs.

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

- Visual restatements. Use as many visual restatements as possible, such as pictures, graphs, tables, and slides.
- Gestures. Use more facial and hand gestures to emphasize the meaning of words.
- Demonstration. Act out as many themes as possible.
- Pauses. Pause more frequently.
- Summaries. Hand out written summaries of your verbal presentation.

ATTRIBUTION

- Silence. When there is a silence, wait. Do not jump in to fill the silence. The other person is probably just thinking more slowly in the non-native language or translating.
- Intelligence. Do not equate poor grammar and mispronunciation with lack of intelligence; it is usually a sign of second language use.
- Differences. If unsure, assume difference, not similarity.

COMPREHENSION

- Understanding. Do not just assume that they understand; assume that they do not understand.
- Checking comprehension. Have colleagues repeat their understanding of the material back to you. Do not simply ask if they under stand or not. Let them explain what they understand to you.

DESIGN

- Breaks. Take more frequent breaks. Second language comprehension is exhausting. Small modules. Divide the material into smaller modules.
- Longer time frame. Allocate more time for each module than usual in a monolingual program.

MOTIVATION

- Encouragement. Verbally and nonverbally encourage and reinforce speaking by non-native language participants.
- Drawing out. Explicitly draw out marginal and passive participants.
- Reinforcement. Do not embarrass novice speakers.[3]

Standing Back from Yourself

Perhaps the most difficult skill in cross-cultural communication involves standing back from yourself, or being aware that you do not know everything, that a situation may not make sense, that your guesses may be wrong, and that the ambiguity in the situation may continue. In this sense the ancient Roman dictum "knowledge is power" becomes true. In knowing yourself, you gain power over your perceptions and reactions; you can control your own behavior and your reactions to others' behavior. Cross-cultural awareness complements in-depth self awareness. A lack of self-awareness negates the usefulness of cross cultural awareness.

One of the most poignant examples of the powerful interplay between description, interpretation, evaluation, and empathy involves a Scottish businessman's relationship with a Japanese colleague. The following story recounts the Scottish businessman's experience.

Cross-Cultural Communication

Japanese Pickles and Mattresses, Incorporated

It was my first visit to Japan. As a gastronomic adventurer, and because I believe cuisine is one route which is freely available and highly effective as a first step towards a closer understanding of another country, I was disappointed on my first evening when the Japanese offered me a Western meal.

As tactfully as possible I suggested that some time during my stay I would like to try a Japanese menu, if that could be arranged without inconvenience. There was some small reluctance evident on the part of my hosts (due of course to their thought that I was being very polite asking for Japanese food which I didn't really like, so to be good hosts they had to politely find a way of not having me eat it!). But eventually, by an elegantly progressive route starting with Western food with a slightly Japanese bias through to genuine Japanese food, my hosts were convinced that I really wanted to eat Japanese style and was not "posing."

From then on they became progressively more enthusiastic in suggesting the more exotic Japanese dishes, and I guess I graduated when, after an excellent meal one night (apart from the Japanese pickles) on which I had lavished praise, they said, "Do you like Japanese pickles?" To this, without preamble, I said, "No!," to which reply, with great laughter all round, they responded, "Nor do we!"

During this gastronomic getting-together week, I had also been trying to persuade them that I really did wish to stay in traditional Japanese hotels rather than the very Westernized ones my hosts had selected because they thought I would prefer my "normal" lifestyle. (I should add that at this time traditional Japanese hotels were still available and often cheaper than, say, the Osaka Hilton.)

Anyway, after the pickles joke it was suddenly announced that Japanese hotels could be arranged. For the remaining two weeks of my stay, as I toured the major cities, on most occasions a traditional Japanese hotel was substituted for the Western one on my original schedule.

Many of you will know that a traditional Japanese room has no furniture except a low table and a flower arrangement. The "bed" is a mattress produced just before you retire from a concealed cupboard, accompanied by a cereal-packed pillow.

One memorable evening my host and I had finished our meal together in "my" room. I was expecting him to shortly make his "good night" and retire, as he had been doing all week, to his own room. However, he stayed

unusually long and was, to me, obviously in some sort of emotional crisis. Finally, he blurted out, with great embarrassment, "Can I sleep with you?!"

As they say in the novels, at this point I went very still! My mind was racing through all the sexual taboos and prejudices my own up bringing had instilled, and I can still very clearly recall how I analyzed: "I'm bigger than he is so I can fight him off, but then he's probably an expert in the martial arts, but on the other hand he's shown no signs of being gay up until now and he is my host and there is a lot of business at risk and there's no such thing as rape, et cetera.... !

It seemed a hundred years, though it was only a few seconds, before I said, feeling as if I was pulling the trigger in Russian roulette, "Yes, sure."

Who said that the Orientals are inscrutable? The look of relief that followed my reply was obvious. Then he looked worried and concerned again, and said, "Are you sure?"

I reassured him and he called in the maid, who fetched his mattress from his room and laid it on the floor alongside mine. We both went to bed and slept all night without any physical interaction.

Later I learned that for the traditional Japanese one of the greatest compliments you can be paid is for the host to ask, "Can I sleep with you?" This goes back to the ancient feudal times, when life was cheap, and what the invitation really said was, "I trust you with my life. I do not think that you will kill me while I sleep. You are my true friend."

To have said "No" to the invitation would have been an insult— "I don't trust you not to kill me while I sleep"—or, at the very least, my host would have been acutely embarrassed because he had taken the initiative. If I refused because I had failed to perceive the invitation as a compliment, he would have been out of countenance on two grounds: the insult to him in the traditional context and the embarrassment he would have caused me by "forcing" a negative, uncomprehending response from me. As it turned out, the outcome was superb. He and I were now "blood brothers," as it were. His assessment of me as being "ready for Japanization" had been correct and his obligations under ancient Japanese custom had been fulfilled. I had totally misinterpreted his intentions through my own cultural conditioning. It was sheer luck, or luck plus a gut feeling that I'd gotten it wrong, that caused me to make the correct response to his extremely complimentary and committed invitation.[4]

SUMMARY

Cross-cultural communication confronts us with limits to our perceptions, our interpretations, and our evaluations. Cross-cultural perspectives tend to render everything relative and slightly uncertain. Entering a foreign culture is tantamount to knowing the words without knowing the music, or knowing the music without knowing the beat. Our natural tendencies lead us back to our prior experience: our default option becomes the familiarity of our own culture, thus precluding our ac curate understanding of others' cultures.

Strategies to overcome our natural parochial tendencies exist: with care, the default option can be avoided. We can learn to see, understand, and control our own cultural conditioning. In facing foreign cultures, we can emphasize description rather than interpretation or evaluation, and thus minimize self-fulfilling stereotypes and premature closure. We can recognize and use our stereotypes as guides rather than rejecting them as unsophisticated simplifications. Effective cross-cultural communication presupposes the interplay of alternative realities: it rejects the actual or potential domination of one reality over another.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The most effective international managers use stereotypes. What are some of the ways that you can use stereotypes to your advantage when working with people from other countries?
2. Today many managers must work with people from other cultures, both at home and when traveling abroad. What are some of the ways that your organization could train people to communicate more effectively with foreigners?

3. What stereotypes do you have concerning lawyers? How about South Africans? If you had an appointment with a South African lawyer, what would you expect and how would you prepare for the meeting?
4. In seeking to understand the importance of nonverbal communication, we must start by examining ourselves. List four examples of nonverbal communication that you commonly use and what each means to you. Then indicate how each might be misinterpreted by someone from a foreign culture.
5. List four examples of nonverbal communication that are used by managers in other parts of the world but not in your country. Indicate how each might be misinterpreted by colleagues from your country.

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