

1.2.2: How to Understand Intercultural Communication

Learning Objectives

1. Describe strategies to understand intercultural communication, prejudice, and ethnocentrism.

The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall is often cited as a pioneer in the field of intercultural communication (Chen, G. and Starosta, W., 2000). Born in 1914, Hall spent much of his early adulthood in the multicultural setting of the American Southwest, where Native Americans, Spanish-speakers, and descendants of pioneers came together from diverse cultural perspectives. He then traveled the globe during World War II and later served as a U.S. State Department official. Where culture had once been viewed by anthropologists as a single, distinct way of living, Hall saw how the perspective of the individual influences interaction. By focusing on interactions rather than cultures as separate from individuals, he asked us to evaluate the many cultures we ourselves belong to or are influenced by as well as those with whom we interact. While his view makes the study of intercultural communication far more complex, it also brings a healthy dose of reality to the discussion. Hall is generally credited with eight contributions to our study of intercultural communication (Chen, G. and Starosta, W., 2000; Leeds-Hurwitz, W., 1990; McLean, S., 2005):

1. *Compare cultures.* Focus on the interactions versus general observations of culture.
2. *Shift to local perspective.* Local level versus global perspective.
3. *You don't have to know everything to know something.* Time, space, gestures, and gender roles can be studied, even if we lack a larger understanding of the entire culture.
4. *There are rules we can learn.* People create rules for themselves in each community that we can learn from, compare, and contrast.
5. *Experience counts.* Personal experience has value in addition to more comprehensive studies of interaction and culture.
6. *Perspectives can differ.* Descriptive linguistics serves as a model to understand cultures, and the U.S. Foreign Service adopted it as a base for training.
7. *Intercultural communication can be applied to international business.* U.S. Foreign Service training yielded applications for trade and commerce and became a point of study for business majors.
8. *It integrates the disciplines.* Culture and communication are intertwined and bring together many academic disciplines.

Hall shows us that emphasis on a culture as a whole, and how it operates, may lead us to neglect individual differences. Individuals may hold beliefs or practice customs that do not follow their own cultural norm. When we resort to the mental shortcut of a stereotype, we lose these unique differences. Stereotypes can be defined as a generalization about a group of people that oversimplifies their culture (Rogers, E. and Steinfatt, T., 1999).

The American psychologist Gordon Allport explored how, when, and why we formulate or use stereotypes to characterize distinct groups. His results may not surprise you. Look back at the third of the Note 18.1 “Introductory Exercises” for this chapter and examine the terms you used to describe a culture with which you are unfamiliar. Were the terms flattering or pejorative? Did they reflect respect for the culture or did they make unfavorable value judgments? Regardless of how you answered, you proved Allport’s main point. When we do not have enough contact with people or their cultures to understand them well, we tend to resort to stereotypes (Allport, G., 1958).

As Hall notes, experience has value. If you do not know a culture, you should consider learning more about it firsthand if possible. The people you interact with may not be representative of the culture as a whole, but that is not to say that what you learn lacks validity. Quite the contrary; Hall asserts that you can, in fact, learn something without understanding everything, and given the dynamic nature of communication and culture, who is to say that your lessons will not serve you well? Consider a study abroad experience if that is an option for you, or learn from a classmate who comes from a foreign country or an unfamiliar culture. Be open to new ideas and experiences, and start investigating. Many have gone before you, and today, unlike in generations past, much of the information is accessible. Your experiences will allow you to learn about another culture and yourself, and help you to avoid prejudice.

Prejudice involves a negative preconceived judgment or opinion that guides conduct or social behavior (McLean, S., 2005). As an example, imagine two people walking into a room for a job interview. You are tasked to interview both, and having read the previous section, you know that Allport rings true when he says we rely on stereotypes when encountering people or cultures with which we have had little contact. Will the candidates’ dress, age, or gender influence your opinion of them? Will their race or

ethnicity be a conscious or subconscious factor in your thinking process? Allport's work would indicate that those factors and more will make you likely to use stereotypes to guide your expectations of them and your subsequent interactions with them.

People who treat other with prejudice often make assumptions, or take preconceived ideas for granted without question, about the group or communities. As Allport illustrated for us, we often assume characteristics about groups with which we have little contact. Sometimes we also assume similarity, thinking that people are all basically similar. This denies cultural, racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and many other valuable, insightful differences.

Key Takeaway

Ethnocentric tendencies, stereotyping, and assumptions of similarity can make it difficult to learn about cultural differences.

Exercises

1. People sometimes assume that learning about other cultures is unnecessary if we simply treat others as we would like to be treated. To test this assumption, try answering the following questions.

1. When receiving a gift from a friend, should you open it immediately, or wait to open it in private?
2. When grocery shopping, should you touch fruits and vegetables to evaluate their freshness?
3. In a conversation with your instructor or your supervisor at work, should you maintain direct eye contact?

Write down your answers before reading further. Now let's explore how these questions might be answered in various cultures.

1. In Chile, it is good manners to open a gift immediately and express delight and thanks. But in Japan it is a traditional custom to not open a gift in the giver's presence.
2. In the United States, shoppers typically touch, hold, and even smell fruits and vegetables before buying them. But in northern Europe this is strongly frowned upon.
3. In mainstream North American culture, people are expected to look directly at each other when having a conversation. But a cultural norm for many Native Americans involves keeping one's eyes lowered as a sign of respect when speaking to an instructor or supervisor.

No one can be expected to learn all the "dos and don'ts" of the world's myriad cultures; instead, the key is to keep an open mind, be sensitive to other cultures, and remember that the way you'd like to be treated is not necessarily the way others would appreciate.

2. Please write a short paragraph where your perception of someone was changed once you got to know them. Share and compare with your classmates

References

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