

Prepare Yourself

There's no better preparation for intercultural communication than learning about the other culture. Fortunately, there are numerous sources to draw on. View a video or film that presents a realistic view of the culture. Read what members of the culture as well as "outsiders" write about the culture. Scan magazines and websites from the culture. Talk with members of the culture. Chat in international chat rooms. Read blogs from members of the culture. Read materials addressed to people who need to communicate with those from other cultures. The easiest way to do this is to search the Internet for such keywords as *culture*, *international*, and *foreign travel*.

Another part of this preparation is to recognize and face fears that may stand in the way of effective intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 1994; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). For example, you may fear for your self-esteem. You may be anxious about your ability to control the intercultural situation, or you may worry about your own level of discomfort. You may fear saying something that will be considered politically incorrect or culturally insensitive.

You may fear that you'll be taken advantage of by a member of the other culture. Depending on your own stereotypes, you may fear being lied to, financially duped, or made fun of. You may fear that members of this other group will react to you negatively. You may fear, for example, that they will not like you or will disapprove of your attitudes or beliefs or perhaps even reject you as a person. Conversely, you may fear negative reactions from members of your own group. They might, for example, disapprove of your socializing with culturally different people.

Some fears, of course, are reasonable. In many cases, however, fears are groundless. Either way, you need to assess your concerns logically and weigh their consequences carefully. Then you'll be able to make informed choices about your communications.

Reduce Your Ethnocentrism

As you learn your culture's ways, you develop an **ethnic identity**—that is, a commitment to the beliefs and philosophy of your culture (Chung & Ting-Toomey, 1999). The degree to which you identify with your cultural group can be measured by your responses to such questions as the following (from Ting-Toomey, 1981). Using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), indicate how true the following statements are for you:

- I am increasing my involvement in activities with my ethnic group.
- I involve myself in causes that will help members of my ethnic group.

- It feels natural being part of my ethnic group.
- I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group.
- I am happy to be a member of my ethnic group.
- I have a strong sense of belonging to my ethnic group.
- I often talk to other members of my group to learn more about my ethnic culture.

High scores (5s and 4s) indicate a strong commitment to your culture's values and beliefs; low numbers (1s and 2s) indicate a relatively weak commitment. **Ethnocentrism** is the tendency to see others and their behaviors through your own cultural filters, often as distortions of your own behaviors. It's the tendency to evaluate the values, beliefs, and behaviors of your own culture as more positive, superior, logical, and natural than those of other cultures. So although ethnocentrism may give you pride in your own culture and its achievements and may encourage you to sacrifice for that culture, it also may lead you to see other cultures as inferior and may foster an unwillingness to profit from the contributions of other cultures. For example, recent research shows a "substantial relationship" between ethnocentrism and homophobia (Wrench & McCroskey, 2003).

Ethnocentrism exists on a continuum. People are not either ethnocentric or not ethnocentric; rather, most are somewhere between these polar opposites. And, of course, your degree of ethnocentrism varies depending on the group on which you focus. For example, if you're Greek American, you may have a low degree of ethnocentrism when dealing with Italian Americans, but a high degree when dealing with Turkish Americans or Japanese Americans. Your degree of ethnocentrism (and we're all ethnocentric to at least some degree) will influence your communication in all its forms, an influence illustrated throughout this text.

Confront Your Stereotypes

Stereotypes, especially when they operate below the level of conscious awareness, can create serious communication problems. Originally, *stereotype* was a printing term that referred to the plate that printed the same image over and over. A sociological or psychological **stereotype** is a fixed impression of a group of people. Everyone has attitudinal stereotypes—of national groups, religious groups, or racial groups or perhaps of criminals, prostitutes, teachers, or plumbers. Ask yourself, for example, if you have any stereotypes of, say, bodybuilders, the opposite sex, a racial group different from your own, members of a religion very different from your

the-o-ry noun statement of explanation, formulation of relationships, reasoned generalization

UNDERSTANDING THEORY AND RESEARCH

Language and Thought

The linguistic relativity hypothesis claims (1) that the language you speak influences the thoughts you have and (2) that, therefore, people speaking widely differing languages will see the world differently and will think differently.

Theory and research, however, have not been able to find much support for this claim. A more modified hypothesis currently seems supported: The language you speak helps you to talk about what you see and perhaps to highlight what you see. For example, if you speak a language that is rich in color terms (English is a good example), you will find it easier to talk about nuances of color than will someone from a culture that has fewer color terms (some cultures, for example, distinguish only two, three, or four parts of the color spectrum). But this doesn't mean that people see the world differently, only that their language helps (or doesn't help) them to talk about certain variations in the world and may make it easier (or more difficult) to focus their thinking on such variations.

Nor does it mean that people speaking widely differing languages are doomed to misunderstand one

another. Translation enables you to understand a great deal of the meaning in any foreign language message. And, of course, you have your communication skills; you can ask for clarification, for additional examples, for restatement. You can listen actively, give feedback and feedback, use perception checking, and employ a host of other skills you'll encounter throughout this course.

Language differences don't make for very important differences in perception or thought. Difficulties in intercultural understanding are due more often to ineffective communication than to differences in languages.

Working with Theories and Research

Based on your own experience, how influential do you find language differences to be in perception and thought? Can you recall any misunderstandings that might be attributed to a particular language's leading its speakers to see or interpret things differently?

own, hard drug users, or college professors. It is very likely that you have stereotypes of several or perhaps all of these groups.

Although we often think of stereotypes as negative ("They're lazy, dirty, and only interested in getting high"), they may also be positive ("They're smart, hardworking, and extremely loyal"). But, even positive stereotypes have negative consequences; they reinforce the idea that members are fundamentally different and can be easily grouped together (thereby denying individual differences). Not surprisingly, even positive stereotypes generate negative feelings in those stereotyped (Kay, Day, & Zanna, in press).

If you have these fixed impressions, you might, upon meeting a member of a particular group, see that person primarily as a member of that group. Initially, a stereotype may provide you with some helpful orientation. However, it creates problems when you apply to a person all the characteristics you assign to members of that person's group without examining the unique individual. If you meet a politician, for example, you may apply to the person a series of stereotypical "politician" images. To complicate matters further, you may see in the person's behavior the manifestation of various characteristics that you would not see if you did not know that this person was a politician. In online communication,

because there are few visual and auditory cues, it's not surprising to find that people form impressions of their online communication partner with a heavy reliance on stereotypes (Jacobson, 1999).

Consider another kind of stereotype: You're driving along a dark road and are stopped at a stop sign. A car pulls up beside you and three teenagers jump out and rap on your window. There may be a variety of reasons for this: They may need help, they may want to ask directions, or they may be planning a carjacking. Your self-protective stereotype may help you decide on "carjacking" and may lead you to pull away and into the safety of a busy service station. In doing that, of course, you may have escaped being carjacked, or you may have failed to assist innocent people who needed your help.

Stereotyping can lead to two major thinking and communication barriers. First, you will fail to appreciate the multifaceted nature of all people and all groups. The tendency to group a person into a class and to respond to that person primarily as a member of that class can lead you to perceive that a person possesses those qualities (usually negative) that you believe characterize the group to which he or she belongs. For example, consider your stereotype of an avid computer user. Very likely it's quite different from the research findings—which show that such users are as often

female as male and are as sociable, popular, and self-assured as their peers who are not into heavy computer use (Schott & Selwyn, 2000).

Second, stereotyping also can lead you to ignore the unique characteristics of an individual; you therefore fail to benefit from the special contributions each person can bring to an encounter.



Explore the **Exercise** “How Open Are You Inter-Culturally?” at **MyCommunicationLab**

Increase Mindfulness

Being mindful rather than mindless (a distinction considered in more detail in Chapter 7) is generally helpful in intercultural communication situations (Burgoon, Berger, & Waldron, 2000). When you’re in a mindless state, you behave on the basis of assumptions that would not normally pass intellectual scrutiny. For example, you know that cancer is not contagious, and yet you may still avoid touching cancer patients. You know that people who are blind generally don’t have hearing problems, yet you may use a louder voice when talking to persons who are visually impaired. When the discrepancies between behaviors and available evidence are pointed out and your mindful state is awakened, you quickly realize that these behaviors are not logical or realistic.

You can look at this textbook and your course in human communication as means of awakening your mindful state about the way you engage in interpersonal, group, and public communication. After completing this course, you should be much more mindful and much less mindless about all your communication behavior.

Avoid Overattribution

Overattribution is the tendency to attribute too much of a person’s behavior or attitudes to one of that person’s characteristics (she thinks that way because she’s a woman; he believes that because he was raised as a Catholic). In intercultural communication situations, overattribution appears in two ways. First, it’s the tendency to see too much of what a person believes or does as caused by the person’s cultural identification. Second, it’s the tendency to see a person as a spokesperson for his or her particular culture—to assume that because a person is, say, African American, he or she is therefore knowledgeable about the entire African American experience or that the person’s thoughts are always focused on



COMMUNICATION CHOICE POINT

CONFLICTING CULTURAL BELIEFS You’re dating a person from a culture very different from your own, and your views on important matters (for example, relationship responsibilities, finances, children, and religion) differ widely. You’re now wondering if there’s any future for this relationship. **What are some of your options for exploring this question by yourself and with your dating partner? What are some of the things you might say to your partner?**

African American issues. People’s ways of thinking and ways of behaving are influenced by a wide variety of factors; culture is just one of them.

Recognize Differences

To communicate interculturally it’s necessary to recognize (1) the differences between yourself and people from other cultures, (2) the differences within the other cultural group, (3) the numerous differences in meaning, and (4) differences in dialect and accent.

Differences between Yourself and the Culturally Different.

A common barrier to intercultural communication occurs when you assume similarities and ignore differences. When you do, you’ll fail to notice important distinctions and be more apt to miscommunicate. Consider this example: An American invites a Filipino coworker to dinner. The Filipino politely refuses. The American is hurt and feels that the Filipino does not want to be friendly. The Filipino is hurt and concludes that the invitation was not extended sincerely. Here, it seems, both the American and the Filipino assume that their customs for inviting people to dinner are the same when, in fact, they aren’t. A Filipino expects to be invited several times before accepting a dinner invitation. When an invitation is given only once, it’s viewed as insincere.

eth·ics noun morality, standards of conduct, moral judgment

MAKING ETHICAL CHOICES

Culture and Ethics

One of the most shocking revelations to come to world attention after the events of September 11, 2001, was the way in which women were treated under Taliban rule in Afghanistan: Females could not be educated or even go out in public without a male relative escort and when in public had to wear garments that covered their entire body.

Throughout history there have been cultural practices that today would be judged unethical. Sacrificing virgins to the gods, burning people who held different religious beliefs, and sending children to fight religious wars are obvious examples. But even today there are practices woven deep into the fabric of different cultures that you might find unethical. As you read these few examples of cultural practices with special relevance to interpersonal communication, consider what U.S. cultural practices people in other cultures might judge as unethical.

- only men can initiate divorce, and only men are permitted to drive

- female genital mutilation whereby part or all of a young girl's genitals are surgically altered so she can never experience sexual intercourse without extreme pain, a practice designed to keep her a virgin until marriage
- the belief and practice that a woman must be subservient to her husband's will
- women should not report spousal abuse because it will reflect negatively on the family
- sexual behavior between members of the same sex is punishable by imprisonment and even death

Ethical Choice Point

What ethical obligations do you have for communicating your beliefs about cultural practices you think are unethical when such topics come up in conversation or in class discussions? What are your ethical choices?

Here's another example: An American college student hears the news that her favorite uncle has died. She bites her lip, pulls herself up, and politely excuses herself from the group of foreign students with whom she is having dinner. The Russian thinks: "How unfriendly." The Italian thinks: "How insincere." The Brazilian thinks: "How unconcerned." To many Americans, it's a sign of bravery to endure pain (physical or emotional) in silence and without any outward show of emotion. To members of other groups, such silence is often interpreted negatively to mean that the individual does not consider them friends who can share such sorrow because, in their cultures, people are expected to reveal to friends how they feel.

Differences within the Culturally Different Group. Recognize that within every cultural group there are vast and important differences. As all Americans are not alike, neither are all Indonesians, Greeks, Mexicans, and so on. When you ignore these differences—when you assume that all persons covered by the same label (in this case a national or ethnic label) are the same—you're guilty of stereotyping. A good example of this is seen in the use of the term *African American*. The

term stresses the unity of Africa and of those who are of African descent and is analogous to *Asian American* or *European American*. At the same time, it ignores the great diversity within the African continent when, for example, it's used as analogous to *German American* or *Japanese American*. More analogous terms would be *Nigerian American* or *Ethiopian American*. Within each culture there are smaller cultures that differ greatly from each other and from the larger culture.

Differences in Meaning. See the meaning of a message not only in the words used but also in the people using them (a principle we'll return to in Chapter 5). Consider, for example, the differences in meaning that exist for words such as *religion* to a born-again Christian and an atheist and *lunch* to a Haitian farmer and a Madison Avenue advertising executive. Even though the same word is used, its meanings will vary greatly depending on the listeners' cultural definitions.

The same is true of nonverbal messages. For example, a left-handed American who eats with the left hand may be seen by a Muslim as obscene. To the Muslim, the left hand isn't used for eating or for shaking hands but to clean oneself after excretory

functions. So using the left hand to eat or to shake hands would generally be considered inappropriate.

Differences in Dialect and Accent. **Dialects** are variations in a language, mainly in the grammar and the semantics. The difference between language and dialect—at least as viewed by most linguists—is that different languages are mutually *unintelligible*; different dialects are mutually intelligible. So, for example, a person who grew up with only the English language would not be able to understand Russian and vice versa. But, people speaking different dialects of English (say, Southern and Northern) would be able to understand each other.

It's interesting to note that the Southerner, for example, will perceive the New Englander to speak with an accent but will not perceive another Southerner to have an accent. Similarly, the New Englander will perceive the Southerner to have an accent but not a fellow New Englander. Actually, linguists would argue that everyone speaks a dialect; it's just that we don't perceive speech like ours to be a dialect. We only think of speech different from ours as being a dialect.

Some dialects are popularly (but not scientifically) labeled “standard” and some are labeled “nonstandard.” Standard dialect would be the language that is recommended by dictionaries and that is covered in the English handbooks you've likely already experienced. Nonstandard dialect would be any variation from this. This concept of dialect can easily and logically be extended to texting and social media language. Today, the abbreviated texting style would be considered nonstandard; tomorrow, things may be different.

Linguistically, all dialects are equal. But, although no one dialect is linguistically superior to any other dialect, it is equally true that judgments are made on the basis of dialect and the type of judgment made would depend on the person making the judgment. So, for example, you'd be advised to use standard dialect in applying to the traditional conservative law firm and to write your e-mails to them in Standard English, the kind recommended by the English handbooks. On the other hand, when you're out with friends or texting, you may feel more comfortable using nonstandard forms.

When differences in speech are differences in pronunciation we refer to them as **accents**, the emphasis or stress you place on various syllables. Just as everyone speaks with a particular dialect, everyone also speaks with a particular accent. Again, we notice accents that are different from our own and, in fact, don't refer to speech that sounds like ours as having any accent at all. But, all speakers speak with an

accent. The “accents” that we probably notice most often are those that occur in speakers who learned the language in their teens or later. The second language is spoken through a kind of filter created by the original language. But, if you grew up in an English-speaking country with English-speaking parents, you also speak with an accent. It's just that you don't perceive it as such.

Linguistically, everyone speaks with an accent; it's simply a fact of life. In terms of communication, however, we need to recognize that accents are often used by people to pigeon-hole and stereotype others; for example, in some people's minds, certain accents are associated with lower class and others with upper class. Some accents are perceived as more credible, more knowledgeable, and more educated than others.

Adjust Your Communication

Intercultural communication (in fact, all communication) takes place only to the extent that you and the person you're trying to communicate with share the same system of symbols. As Chapter 1 discussed, your interaction will be hindered to the extent that your language and nonverbal systems differ (the principle of adjustment). Therefore, it's important to adjust your communication to compensate for cultural differences.

Furthermore, it helps if you share your own system of signals with others so they can better understand you. Although some people may know what you mean by your silence or by your avoidance of eye contact, others may not. Generally, avoid expecting others to decode your behaviors accurately without help.

Communication accommodation theory, as explained in Chapter 1, holds that speakers will adjust or accommodate to the communication style of their listeners in order to interact more pleasantly and efficiently. As you adjust your messages, recognize that each culture has its own rules and customs for communication (Barna, 1997). These rules identify what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. Thus, for example, in U.S. culture you would call a person you wished to date three or four days in advance. In certain Asian cultures you might call the person's parents weeks or even months in advance. In U.S. culture you say, as a general friendly gesture and not as a specific invitation, “come over and pay us a visit sometime.” To members of other cultures, this comment is sufficient to prompt the listeners actually to visit at their convenience.

Table 2.4, on the following page, summarizes these guidelines for more effective intercultural communication.

TABLE 2.4

In A Nutshell Improving Intercultural Communication

Here are some guidelines for improving intercultural communication along with some specific strategies.

General Guidelines	Specific Strategies
Prepare Yourself	Read about, view images and videos of, and interact with culturally different individuals.
Reduce Your Ethnocentrism	Becoming aware of your own ethnocentrism can help you see its illogic.
Confront Your Stereotypes	Recognize that stereotypes are generalizations that prevent you from seeing the individual except through this stereotype.
Increase Mindfulness	Become aware of why you do or think what you do; act with awareness, and develop and question beliefs and attitudes mindfully.
Avoid Overattribution	Avoid attributing another's behavior to one or even a few factors; most often behavior is a combination of interrelated factors.
Recognize Differences	Recognize that differences exist between yourself and the culturally different, within the culturally different group, in meaning, and in dialect and accent. At the same time, don't fail to note the similarities.
Adjust Your Communication	Understanding the meanings that others have for gestures or for interpersonal interactions will help you adjust your own messages.



Analyzing Video Choices



Jamie and Tim are in the same world history class. It is Friday afternoon, and their midterm papers are due Monday morning. Jamie has already turned in his paper, but Tim is just getting started. Tim's laptop is acting up, so he asks Jamie to borrow his for the weekend. Jamie wants to be polite and wants to help his friend, but isn't comfortable loaning out his laptop and wonders if their different cultures are affecting how they see the situation. Jamie considers the topics covered in this chapter as he contemplates his communication choices for dealing with these differences and the likely advantages and disadvantages of each choice. Log on to www.mycommunicationlab.com to view this video, to see how Jamie's choices played out, and to respond to a few discussion questions.



Watch the Video
"Term Paper" at
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