

# Emotions and Intercultural Communication

David MATSUMOTO & Sachiko TAKEUCHI

In this article, we examine the special role of emotions in intercultural communication, and suggest that the ability to regulate emotion is one of the keys to effective intercultural communication. We first describe verbal and nonverbal components of communication, and their relative contributions. Then, we highlight the pervasive and profound influence of culture on both encoding and decoding processes in communication. We then compare and contrast intracultural v. intercultural communication, and describe how conflict and misunderstandings are inherent and inevitable in the latter. We discuss strategies for engaging in successful intercultural communication, focusing on the role of emotions, but also highlighting the importance of critical thinking and openness/flexibility. We discuss a growth model of intercultural sensitivity that has at its core the ability to regulate emotions. Throughout, we blend literature from both communication and psychology in producing a unique perspective on this topic.

**Keywords:** emotion, intercultural communication, intercultural sensitivity

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Although many definitions of communication and intercultural communication exist (see reviews by Kim and Gudykunst, 1988; Samovar & Porter, 1995), we define communication simply as the exchange of knowledge, ideas, thoughts, concepts, and emotions among people. Consequently, *intercultural* communication refers to that exchange among people of different cultures; *intracultural* communication refers to that exchange among people of the same

culture.

In this article, we examine the special role of emotions in intercultural communication, and suggest that the ability to regulate emotion is one of the keys to effective intercultural communication. Previous work on intercultural communication effectiveness has generally focused on its cognitive components, including cultural knowledge, understanding of process, and the like. Instead, we focus on emotion in intercultural communication episodes, and particularly in the resolution of inevitable intercultural conflict. We argue that emotion regulation is a gatekeeper ability that allows people to engage in successful conflict resolution and leading to effective, long-term intercultural communication.

We first describe verbal and nonverbal components of communication, and their relative contributions. Then, we highlight the pervasive and profound influence of culture on both encoding and decoding processes in communication. We then compare and contrast intracultural v. intercultural communication, and describe how conflict and misunderstandings are inherent and inevitable in the latter. We discuss strategies for engaging in successful intercultural communication, focusing on the role of emotions, but also highlighting the importance of critical thinking and openness/flexibility. We discuss a growth model of intercultural sensitivity that has at its core the ability to regulate emotions. Throughout, we blend literature from both communication and psychology in producing a unique perspective on this topic.

### **The Components of Communication**

#### **Sources, Signals, Messages and More . . .**

People communicate using both verbal and nonverbal modes. The verbal mode involves language which, of course, is rich, each having its own set of phonemes, morphemes, and lexicon; syntax and grammar; phonology; semantics; and pragmatics. Verbal lan-

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guage is a meaningful system which comprises these components, symbolizes the world, and allows for the exchange of ideas, thoughts, and feelings via this symbol system.

Nonverbal behaviors include all non-language behaviors in which we engage, including facial expressions, gaze and eye contact, voice and paralinguistic cues, interpersonal space, gestures, body posture, and silence. Like language, nonverbal behavior is multidimensional; almost thirty years ago, Ekman and Friesen (1969) classified nonverbal behaviors into five categories: illustrators, regulators, emblems and gestures, adaptors, and emotions.

While verbal language and nonverbal behaviors comprise the two major modes of communication, there are other aspects as well. *Signals* are the specific words and behaviors that are sent during communication. *Messages* are the meanings that are intended or received with the signals. *Channels* refer to the specific modality by which signals are sent and messages are retrieved, much like different channels on a television set. *Encoding* refers to the process of sending signals with intended messages through various channels, while *decoding* refers to the process of interpreting messages via those signals.

When placed in the proper perspective, therefore, the combination of different signals and messages that can be encoded and decoded via the various channels and sources of communication makes it a rich, complex, and fascinating process that is uniquely human.

### **The Relative Contribution of Verbal and Nonverbal Behaviors to the Communication Process**

When communicating, we focus on words. In fact, we receive years of formalized training in schools through childhood and adolescence on language. We are tested on language to gain entry into and graduate from school; and when we learn a foreign lan-



guage, we again focus on the verbal aspects of that language.

This focus is ironic, because ample research documents clearly and convincingly that the bulk of messages decoded during communication episodes comes from nonverbal, not verbal, channels. Recently, we reviewed nine studies examining the relative contribution of verbal language and nonverbal behaviors to the communication process (list of studies available upon request). Eight of them showed a greater contribution of nonverbal behaviors to decoded messages. The degree of contribution was, in fact, quite large (average  $R^2$  effect size = .56, average  $r = .75$ ), and is actually larger when discrepant messages are transmitted. That is, when faced with ambiguous messages posed by discrepant signals in the verbal and nonverbal channels, people generally place more meaning from nonverbal behaviors.

### **The Role of Culture in the Communication Process**

Culture has a pervasive and profound influence on verbal and nonverbal encoding and decoding processes. For the sake of presentation, we discuss these as if they are separate; in reality, they are interrelated in a complex system that affects, and is affected by, each other.

#### **Cultural Influences on Verbal Language Encoding**

Culture and language lexicons. Different cultures have different languages, and subcultures have dialects within a language. Each is a unique symbol system that denotes what a culture deems important in its world. That words exist in some languages and not others reflects the fact that different cultures symbolize their worlds differently. For example, Whorf (1956) pointed out that Eskimo language had three words for snow while the English language had only one. The German word *schadenfreude* and the Japanese word *amae*, which do not exist in English, are other examples.



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Another example is the case of self- and other-referents. In English, we typically refer to ourselves as "I", and to someone else as "you." Japanese language, however, includes an extensive choice of terms referring to oneself and others, all dependent upon the relationship between the people interacting (Suzuki, 1978). For example, you refer to your teacher as "teacher" or your boss as "section chief" when you would normally use the English "you." Terms denoting status are also used within the family. There are even different terms for "I", depending on the nature of status relationships and the degree of politeness. This system of self-other referents is also prevalent in other languages, and the ability to be fluent in such languages requires extensive cultural knowledge as well.

Counting systems are another example. In Japanese, round, cylindrical objects are counted by the suffix *hon* (e.g., *ippon*, *nihon*, *sanbon*), while flat objects are counted by *mai* (e.g., *ichimai*, *nimai*, *sanmai*). There are many such counters in Japanese, as in other languages. In English, however, all objects are simply counted by number with no prefix or suffix to denote the type of object being counted.

The Japanese language, like many other languages, have a base-ten numbering system. Eleven is literally ten-one (*ju-ichi*), twelve ten-two (*ju-ni*), twenty two-ten (*ni-ju*). In English, however, numbers one through 19 are unique, and an additive system similar to Japanese numbers starts at twenty. These linguistic differences are thought to contribute to differences in math achievement between the U.S. and Japan (see Stigler & Barnes, 1988).

Culture and pragmatics. Culture not only affects language lexicons, but also its function or pragmatics. For example, Kashima and Kashima (1998) examined 39 languages, and found that cultures whose languages allowed for pronouns to be dropped from sentences tended to be less individualistic, which they interpreted

as reflecting different cultural conceptualizations of self and others. Gudykunst and his colleagues have shown that perceptions of personalization, synchrony, and difficulty in ingroup and outgroup communications differ according to meaningful dimensions of cultural variability (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987). They have also shown that culture, self-construals (i.e., self-concepts), and individual values affect communication styles across cultures (Gudykunst et al., 1992, 1996). The relationship between culture, self-construals, and preferred conversational styles has also been documented by others (e.g., Kim et al., 1996). Cultural differences also exist in the use of apologies (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990), children's personal narratives (Minami & McCabe, 1995), self-disclosure (Chen, 1995), compliments (Barnlund & Araki, 1985), and interpersonal criticism (Nomura & Barnlund, 1983). Collectively, these studies paint a rather complete picture of the profound influence of culture on language pragmatics.

Culture and thought: Linguistic relativity. That language helps to structure thought, and vice versa, is known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*. Over the past forty years, research has shown considerable support for this hypothesis. Niyekawa-Howard (1968), for example, studied the relationship between Japanese grammar and causal attributions of events. Japanese language has a passive form that conveys that the subject of the sentence "was caused to" take the action expressed by the main verb, and that he is not responsible for the act nor the outcome (e.g., *A ha X wo saserareta*). This information can be conveyed in English but only by using cumbersome extra words and phrases. Niyekawa-Howard found that native speakers of Japanese are more likely than English speakers to attribute responsibility to others even when the outcome is positive. Other studies also support the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (e.g., Bloom, 1981; Davies et al., 1998; Garro, 1986; Hoosain,

1986, 1991; Kay & Kempton, 1984).

Some studies, however, have also challenged the validity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, especially with regard to the influence of language lexicons and semantics (e.g., Rosch & Lloyd, 1978). In studying language and perception of color, Berlin and Kay (1969) examined 78 languages, and found people in different cultures perceive colors in the same ways despite radical differences in their languages. Au (1983) conducted five studies comparing Chinese and English, and concluded that there was no support for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis across these studies. Thus, the strength of the influence of language on thought may differ according to the specific aspect of language considered.

Culture and bilingualism. Research involving bilinguals comparing the content of their cognitive abilities while speaking their two languages also supports Sapir-Whorf. Ervin (1964), for example, compared responses from a sample of English and French bilinguals to pictures from the Thematic Apperception Test, and found that subjects demonstrated more aggression, autonomy, and withdrawal in French than they did in English. Also, females demonstrated a greater need for achievement in English than in French. Hull (1987) and Dinges and Hull (1992) reported that Chinese-English and Korean-English immigrant bilinguals who completed the California Psychological Inventory (CPI), once in their native language and once in English, presented different personalities depending on the language they used. These results were later confirmed in a subsequent study using a different measure of personality (Hull, 1990a, b). Matsumoto and Assar (1992) asked bilingual observers in India to judge facial expressions of emotion, once in English, and a second time in Hindi. The judgments were different depending on which language was used.

The research cited in this section describes rather completely how culture influences not only language lexicons and pragmatics,



but also the structure and content of our thoughts. In the next section, we examine the influence of culture on nonverbal behaviors.

### **Cultural Influences on Nonverbal Behavior Encoding**

Culture and facial expressions. Research over the past three decades has shown that facial expressions of anger, contempt, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise are panculturally expressed (see reviews by Ekman, 1982, and Matsumoto, 1996a, b). Cultures differ, however, in the rules that govern how these universal expressions are used. *Cultural display rules* are rules of expression management that dictate the appropriateness of emotion display depending on social circumstances. Learned from infancy, we are so adept at these rules that as adults, we use them automatically and without much conscious awareness. Their existence was first documented in a study comparing American and Japanese participants viewing stressful films while unknowingly being videotaped (Ekman, 1972; Friesen, 1972). Recent research has extended these findings as well (Matsumoto, 1990; Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, & Krupp, 1998).

Culture and gestures. Morris and his colleagues (Morris, Collett, Marsh, & O'Shaughnessy, 1980) have well documented many cultural differences in gestures. The American A-OK sign, for example, is an obscene gesture in many cultures of Europe, having sexual implications. Placing both hands at the side of your head and pointing upwards with the forefingers signals one is angry in some cultures; in others, however, it means that one wants sex. One of us (DM) was witness to a miscommunication gaffe when a person from Japan used this gesture to tell someone from Brazil that his wife was angry. While the Japanese use this gesture to signal anger, the Brazilians construe it as wanting sex. Imagine what the Brazilian thought the Japanese was saying about his wife!

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Culture and gaze. Research on humans and non-human primates has shown that gaze is associated with dominance, power, or aggression (Fehr & Exline, 1987), and affiliation and nurturance (Argyle & Cook, 1976). Fehr and Exline (1987) suggested that the affiliative aspects of gazing begin in infancy, because infants are very attentive to adults as their source of care and protection. Cultures create rules concerning gazing and visual attention, because both aggression and affiliation are behavioral tendencies that are important for group stability and maintenance. Cross-cultural research has well documented differences in these rules. People from Arabic cultures, for example, gaze much longer and more directly at their partners than Americans do (Hall, 1963; Watson & Graves, 1966). Watson (1970) classified 30 countries as either a "contact" culture (that is, those that facilitated physical touch or contact during interaction) or a "noncontact" culture, and found that contact cultures engaged in more gazing and had more direct orientations when interacting with others, less distance, and more touching. Within the U.S., there are differences in gaze and visual behavior between different groups of Americans (Exline, Jones, & Maciorowski, 1977; Fehr, 1977, 1981; LaFrance & Mayo, 1976).

Culture and interpersonal space. Hall (1978) specified four different levels of interpersonal space use depending on social relationship type: intimate, personal, social, and public. While people of all cultures make these distinctions, they differ in the spaces they attribute to them. Arab males, for example, tend to sit closer to each other than American males, with more direct, confrontational types of body orientations (Watson & Graves, 1966). They also had greater eye contact and tended to speak in louder voices. Hall (1963, 1966) concluded that people from Arab cultures generally learn to interact with others at distances close enough to feel the other person's breath. Forston and Larson (1968) cited anecdotal

evidence of how Latin American students tended to interact more closely than did students of European backgrounds. Noesjirwan (1977, 1978) reported that Indonesian subjects tended to sit closer than did Australians. Shuter (1977) reported that Italians interacted more closely than did either Germans or Americans. Shuter (1976) also reported that people from Colombia generally interacted at closer distances than did the subjects from Costa Rica.

Culture and other nonverbal behaviors. Other studies have documented cultural differences in other nonverbal behaviors as well, such as in the semantic meanings attributed to body postures (e.g., Kudoh & Matsumoto, 1985; Matsumoto & Kudoh, 1987), and vocal characteristics and hand and arm movements (Vrij & Winkel, 1991, 1992). Collectively, the evidence provides more than ample support for the notion that culture plays a large role in molding all of our nonverbal behaviors, which comprise an important part of the communication process.

### **Cultural Influences on Decoding Processes**

Cultural filters, ethnocentrism, emotions, and value judgments. Ethnocentrism is *the tendency to view the world through your own cultural filters*. As we grow up, we learn cultural rules of appropriate communicative encoding with respect to both our verbal and nonverbal behaviors. When we are little, these rules are constantly reinforced by parents, friends, teachers, and other enculturation agents (see, for example, evidence for such reinforcement during language acquisition as suggested by Skinner, 1957). Many rules are also transmitted and reinforced by organizations and institutions (e.g., our study of language through the school system). As we get older, we need to be reminded less about these rules, and require less conscious effort. Inevitably they produce the unique differences in each culture in how communication—verbal and non-



verbal—occurs.

As we grow, we also learn how to perceive signals and interpret messages; that is, we learn cultural rules of appropriate decoding as well. Because we share a set of encoding and decoding rules with people of our culture, we develop a set of expectations about communication. This forms a basis of tacit knowledge that needs not be spoken each time we, as adults, communicate with each other.

Not only do we have certain expectations about communication process; we also have learned emotional reactions associated with those expectations. These can range from acceptance and pleasure to outrage, hostility, and frustration. Our emotions are intimately tied to value judgments, which we often make without a second thought. This is natural, because the judgments are often rooted in our upbringing, and those are the only types of judgments we have learned to make. Emotions and values serve as guidelines in helping us form opinions about others and ourselves.

Thus, decoding rules, and their associated emotions and value judgments, form the basis of our “filters” that we use in seeing the world. As we become more enculturated, we add more layers to those filters. These filters are like lenses that allow us to perceive the world in a certain way. By the time we are adults, we share the same filters with others in our cultural group. They become part of our self, inseparable and invisible, and are a normal part of our psychological composition because of the way we are enculturated.

Culture and stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations about people, particularly about their underlying psychological characteristics or personality traits. Stereotypes are inevitable products of normal psychological processes, including selective attention, appraisal, concept formation and categorization, attributions, emotion, and memory (see Matsumoto, 1996a and in preparation, for a

complete discussion). Stereotypes are invaluable aids to us, helping us keep information about the world organized. As a special type of category having to do with people, they are important in helping us interact with others in our world.

Stereotypes are easily reinforced. Stereotypes prime our expectations. We may selectively attend to events that support such stereotypes, and ignore, albeit unconsciously, events and situations that challenge them. Negative attributions may reinforce negative stereotypes. Even when we perceive events contrary to stereotype, we may convince ourselves that the stereotype is correct. Such dismissals can occur quickly and without much conscious thought or effort, and are resilient to emotion.

It is nothing new to consider that our attention, attributional and emotional processes may be biased. Our "psychological composition," which consists of these, and other, processes, constitute an integrated system that is part of our self-concept. We suggest that these psychological processes reinforce our self-concept. Our emotions, attributions, and attention processes are all constructed so as to help us reinforce the cultural knowledge we have learned from many years of enculturation. Even the content of our stereotypes exists in order to reinforce our sense of self, and as we confirm or disconfirm those stereotypes, we reinforce that self-concept. Stereotypes are thus an integral part of this package of psychological processes, and are intimately tied to our emotions, values, and core self.

Culture and social cognition. Culture influences how we interpret the actions of others. Americans, for example, tend to draw inferences about other people's internal states or dispositions that supposedly underlie and even caused their behavior. This bias is known as fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977). Cross-cultural research has shown that such bias may not exist in other cultures. Miller (1984), for example, compared Americans and

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Hindu Indians' explanations for another person's actions, and found that dispositional explanations were common for Americans but much less so for the Hindus. Instead, they provided explanations in terms of the actor's duties, social roles, and other situation-specific characteristics (see also Shweder & Bourne, 1984). Other attributional tendencies, such as self-serving bias, defensive attributions, and the like also are manifested differently in each culture.

In summary, culture plays a large role in decoding signals during communication episodes. This occurs because of cultural influences in the development of ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and social cognition, which are all normal psychological components to everyday life. Cultural decoding rules are intimately associated with emotions and value judgments, and collectively form our self-concepts. Given that communication involves moment to moment switching from encoder to decoder back to encoder, understanding the role of culture in this process is challenging, whether intracultural or intercultural. One way to highlight the unique circumstances under which intercultural communication occurs, however, is to compare these two types of communications.

### **Intracultural v. Intercultural Communication**

#### **A Note about the Difference Between Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Research**

In many contexts, the term cross-cultural communication is used synonymously with the term intercultural communication. While in the context of communication there is no difference between them, there is an important difference between cross-cultural and intercultural *research*. The former refers to the comparison of two or more cultures on some variable of interest (e.g., differences between cultures A and B in the expression of emotions). The latter refers to the study of the interaction between people of two cultures (e.g., differences in how people of cultures A and B express



emotions when they are with people of cultures B and A, respectively).

Most research in the field of intercultural communication is cross-cultural, not intercultural. As such, they do not always reflect data that are directly applicable to the intercultural episode. No matter how many cross-cultural studies we conduct comparing Americans and Japanese, for example, they will not inform us about how people of these two cultures communicate *when interacting with each other*. For research to be intercultural, intercultural data has to be compared with intracultural data; differences in this comparison is what is attributable to intercultural communication *per se*. In understanding the difference between intra- and intercultural communication, only then can we understand what is unique about intercultural communication.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Intracultural v. Intercultural Communication**

Intracultural communication. During intracultural communication, interactants implicitly share the same ground rules. When people communicate within the boundaries of those ground rules, they accept those ground rules and thus can focus on the content of the messages that are being exchanged. When communication occurs within the shared boundaries of culture, we make an implicit judgment that that person is a member of our culture or that the person is engaging in socially appropriate behavior. We may consider the individual to have been socialized "well" into our culture, and we make value judgments about the process and the person's ability to engage in that accepted process.

Even in intracultural situations, when we interact with people who transgress what we view as "normal" or "socially appropriate," we have negative reactions. They occur because we have learned that those transgressions are not appropriate. Oftentimes,

we make negative dispositional attributions about others as "bad" or "stupid" or "had a bad upbringing" or "has no common sense." We make these judgments because these people do not confirm to the accepted standard ground rules for interaction.

Negative stereotypes are easily developed because our cultural filters and ethnocentrism creates a set of expectations in us about others. Communication process that does not match our expectations oftentimes leads to negative attributions about the actors whom we are observing. Such events require what is known as substantive processing (Forgas, 1994), which is most affected by induced emotion. If the emotion induced is negative, then it will contribute to negatively valenced attributions about others. These attributions form the core of a stereotype of such people, and reinforce the value and expectation system that was originally held in the first place. These processes are common even within intracultural communication episodes.

Intercultural communication and uncertainty. Many of the processes that occur in intracultural communication also occur in intercultural encounters. One characteristic that sets it apart, however, is uncertainty and ambiguity concerning the ground rules by which the interaction will occur. Because of the widespread and pervasive influence of culture on all aspects of the communication process, we can not be sure that the rules by which two people from different cultures operate are similar. That is, there is inherent uncertainty in both the verbal and nonverbal behaviors that occur. Intercultural interactants generally engage with each other in a verbal language that is often not a native language for at least one, and sometimes both individuals, thus creating inherent uncertainty in the meaning of the words. Cultural differences in the use of all nonverbal channels produce inherent uncertainty in the messages as well.

Gudykunst and his colleagues have documented how interact-

ants work to reduce uncertainty in intercultural interactions, at least in initial encounters. Their work has been based on Berger (1979) and Berger and Calabrese (1975), who suggested that one of the primary concerns of strangers in initial encounters is the reduction of uncertainty and increasing of predictability in themselves and others. Gudykunst and Nishida (1984) showed that such an effect exists in relation to intent to interrogate, self-disclose, display nonverbal signs of affiliation and attraction, and attributional confidence in Japanese and American communicators. Gudykunst, Sodegami, and Sonoda (1987) extended these findings to include members of different ethnic groups as well.

We agree with the basic tenets of Gudykunst and his colleagues in suggesting that uncertainty reduction is one of the major goals of initial intercultural encounters. Without such reduction, it is impossible for interactants to begin processing the content of signals and interpreting messages properly, because such uncertainty renders messages inherently ambiguous. If uncertainty is reduced, interactants can then focus on the content of the signals and messages that are being exchanged. Intercultural communication is like deciphering coded language: the first step is to decipher the code (i.e., reduce uncertainty); the second is to interpret and respond to the content, once deciphered.

Intercultural communication and conflict. A second characteristic of intercultural communication is the inevitability of conflict and misunderstandings. During intercultural encounters, chances are great that peoples' behaviors do not conform to our expectations. When this occurs, we often interpret those behaviors naturally as transgressions against our value system and morality, as we discussed earlier. They produce negative emotions, which are upsetting to our self-concepts. These conflicts are inevitable in intercultural episodes with both people or with other agents of a cultural system (e.g., public transportation, the post office, shops



and businesses, etc.). These activities are bound to accentuate differences in process, which inevitably lead to conflict or misunderstanding.

Of course, uncertainty contributes to this conflict. People may become impatient with or intolerant of the ambiguity, leading to anger, frustration, or resentment. Even after uncertainty is reduced, however, conflict is inevitable because of the differences in the meaning of verbal language and nonverbal behaviors across cultures, and the associated emotions and values inherent in the cultural system. These produce differences in the interpretation of underlying intent among interactants, a process that is no stranger to intracultural communication as well.

Thus, the development of strategies that deal with potential conflict and misunderstanding is imperative in order to produce successful and effective long-term intercultural communication and relationships. In the next section, we present such a strategy, based on the power of human emotion.

## **Strategies for Successful and Effective Intercultural Communication**

### **Previous Approaches**

Effective intercultural communication is related to the concept of intercultural communication competence (ICC). ICC has been studied quite extensively in the literature, and many definitions of it exist (e.g., see Powers & Lowery, 1984; Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). We define ICC simply as the ability to communicate effectively across cultures. That is, ICC refers to the skills, talents, and strategies in which we engage in order to exchange thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs among people of different cultural backgrounds. That is, we believe that ICC is reliant on a process that ensures successful and effective communication across cultures.

How can we develop such a process? One strategy would be to become thoroughly versant in a culture, recording the cultural similarities and differences found in it and building your own "cultural dictionary" to retrieve at any time. This is a formidable task, as there is so much about culture to learn and so little time, energy, and storage space available. This approach, however, is not without merit, and certainly many people develop such almanacs in their minds about a small number of cultures with which they become intimately familiar through travels, business, homestay programs, and the like. In fact, several studies (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Samovar & Porter, 1985; Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida, 1989; Zimmerman, 1995) have shown that related processes such as knowledge of and attitude toward host culture, ethnocentrism, social distance, and exposure to host culture members are all related to ICC.

But, none of us can create that dictionary of culture for all the cultures and peoples we will possibly come in contact with in our lives, and many of us do not have the opportunities to become truly culturally fluent in this fashion. Instead, the vast majority of us will need to rely on a *process model* of intercultural growth to engage in effective intercultural communication.

But this engagement is not easy because of the inevitability of conflict and misunderstandings due to the existence of cultural differences. Our ethnocentric and stereotypic ways of thinking, which are themselves normal, psychological functions, make it easy for us to create negative value judgments about those differences, conflicts, and misunderstandings. Negative emotions are also associated with these judgments. These negative reactions make it difficult for us to engage in more constructive methods of interacting, and keep us from truly appreciating those differences and integrating with people who are different. As conflicts based on intercultural communications and misunderstandings are inevitable, it

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becomes extremely important to be able to control our negative emotional reactions when engaging with those differences. Those who can will then be able to engage in a more constructive intercultural process, and open the door to more successful intercultural interactions. Those who cannot will have that door closed to them. Emotions, therefore, are central to this process, and hold the key to successful or non-successful intercultural experiences.

#### **Regulating Emotions: A Key to Personal Growth**

Many of us who have experience dealing with children know that, despite their often altruistic nature, when something happens to hurt or upset them, their thinking and worldview revert to a more primitive way of dealing with and understanding their world. It becomes impossible for them to engage in altruistic acts, because they are locked into a more infantile mode of operation. This concept is known as "regression," and it is not the sole domain of children and adolescents; adults regress at times as well. In these situations, it is easy for people to be overcome by those negative feelings, and they "take over" one's way of being. Even the most altruistic or critically minded person may not be able to think or act in such a manner when overcome by such negative emotions.

The arousal of negative emotions in intercultural communication because of inevitable cultural differences is a critical time that defines a key issue in personal growth, which leads to either intercultural success or stagnation (see Figure 1). Individuals who can somehow control those negative feelings by putting them on hold and not acting directly upon them or allowing them to overcome their thinking, acting, and feeling, will be able to then engage in other processes that will aid them to expand their appraisal and attribution of the causes of the differences. Once emotions are held in check, individuals can then engage in critical thinking



## Three Ingredients to Personal Growth

1. Emotion Regulation

2. Critical Thinking (Generation of Rival Hypotheses)

3. Openness/Flexibility to Accept Rival Hypotheses

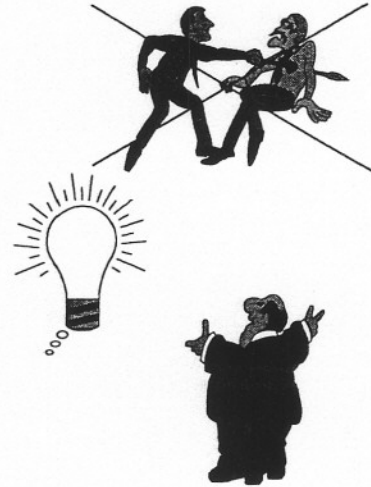


Fig. 1

about the origins of those differences, and hopefully go beyond their cultural framework and to consider other causes of the differences that they may not have even been aware of. If this type of critical thinking can occur, individuals can choose to accept or reject alternative hypotheses concerning the causes of those differences, and hopefully can have the openness and flexibility to accept rival hypotheses that seem most plausible.

For example, during an intercultural encounter, you may notice that the person with whom you are talking avoids your gaze. It may be easy to form a negative impression about this person, if you are accustomed to people looking at each other directly when communicating. In fact, you may have learned that people who do not look you squarely in the eye are not to be trusted, or have something to hide. If you are able, however, to put that reaction on hold, you might think about other possible causes of that be-

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havior in that person. For instance, while eye contact may be preferred in your culture, it may not be preferred in her culture. While direct eye contact may be a sign of respect in your culture, avoiding eye contact may be a sign of respect in her culture. Once these, and other, possible hypotheses are generated, you can then accept or reject them, and if you choose to accept, hopefully you will have the openness and flexibility of changing your mind from your initial reaction.

This model is inherently a growth model. By engaging in critical thinking about cultural differences and being open and flexible to new ways of thinking, you allow for your ways of person perception to grow. You continually add more complexity to your method of interacting with diversity. All of this is possible, however, only when emotions are regulated and negative emotions do not get the best of you.

If, however, our negative emotional reactions overcome us, we cannot engage in critical thinking about those differences. Rather, we regress to a previous way of thinking that is rooted in our ethnocentrism and stereotype. Instead of creating rival hypotheses that will stimulate growth in our thinking, we will instead only reinforce our pre-existing, limited thinking. Openness and flexibility to new ideas is not even an option because these new ideas don't exist. Instead, there is only a regurgitation of stereotypes and ethnocentric attitudes. This is a non-growth model.

The three main ingredients to personal growth in relation to dealing with cultural differences, therefore, is emotion regulation, critical thinking, and openness and flexibility. Of these, emotion regulation is the gatekeeper of the growth process, because if we cannot put our inevitable negative emotions in check, it is impossible to engage in what is clearly higher order thinking about cultural differences.

### More About Critical Thinking

Once emotions are under control, there are many ways in which we can engage in critical thinking about intercultural conflict. Here, we present seven guidelines to this process. We offer these not as answers but as a platform to launch meaningful discussions with others about this important topic.

1. Recognize that culture is a psychological construct. Culture is a multifaceted construct involving both objective and subjective elements (Triandis, 1972). The subjective aspects of culture exist as mental blueprints and are most important to understanding the contribution of culture to human behavior. By recognizing this aspect of culture, we can avoid the stereotypic use of race and nationality in understanding cultural differences.
2. Recognize individual differences within a culture. Within any culture, people differ according to how strongly they adhere to or comply with the values, standards, and mores of that culture. Recognizing these individual differences helps us develop flexibility in our stereotypes.
3. Understand our own filters and ethnocentrism. We can recognize the existence of our own cultural filters and ethnocentrism—how our own cultural upbringing contributed to how we interact with the world and with others. We can recognize that our viewpoint is one of many valid and legitimate views.
4. Allow for the possibility that conflicts are cultural. With a better understanding of cultural influences on behavior, we can allow for the possibility that many conflicts and misunderstandings are due to cultural differences, and avoid personalizing the source of conflict and misunderstanding to perceived shortcomings in others.
5. Recognize that cultural differences are legitimate. When transgressions occur because of cultural differences, we have to recognize that those cultural ways have just as much legitimacy



to them as ours have to us, despite the strength of our reactions.

6. Have tolerance, be patient, and presume good intent. When we are too quick to attribute negative characteristics to others, we deny the possibility that their intent may have been good and that it was only the behavioral manifestations of that good intent that we were at odds with. By being tolerant of transgressions and presuming good intent, we allow that possibility to exist. If we can practice tolerance and presume good intent, we will be able to find ways to explore and react to underlying intent rather than focusing solely on behaviors we find offensive.
7. Learn more about cultural influences on behavior. By recognizing the importance of culture, we face an incredible challenge and opportunity. These challenges bring new opportunities and new hopes, not only for science but also for people and their lives. As we come in contact with people of different cultures from around the world, we are exposed to many different ways culture manifests itself in behavior. As our understanding grows, we will come to appreciate even more the important role culture plays, not only in providing us with a way to live but also in helping us meet the challenges of survival successfully and with integrity. There will never be a shortage of things to learn about cultural influences on human behavior. The important thing is that we have to want to learn it.

### **Intercultural Success or Stagnation: Voyagers v. Vindicators**

The key to successful intercultural communication is the engagement of a personal growth process model where our worldview is constantly being updated by the new and exciting cultural differences with which we engage in our everyday lives. The gatekeeper of this process is the ability to regulate our emotional reactions. If we can do so, then the increasing cultural diversity of the

## Steps in Interpersonal and Intercultural Success or Stagnation

Resolving Your Negative Emotions



Personal Growth and Development



Success

“Voyagers”

Not Resolving Your Negative Emotions



Crystallizing Old Ways,  
No Growth



Stagnation

“Vindicators”

Fig. 2

world is an exciting research laboratory, where we can constantly test our hypotheses, explore new hypotheses, throw out theories that don't work, and create theories that do. In this fashion, the challenge of cultural diversity and intercultural conflicts is a stage for forging new relationships, new ideas, and new people. It is a model for intercultural success for those individuals who can engage in these processes. We call these individuals “Voyagers,” because to them, life is an enjoyable journey (see Figure 2).

Those people who cannot control their emotions reinforce and crystallize their pre-existing ethnocentric and stereotypic ways of dealing with the world that are limited. This is a no growth model, and these individuals are not engaged in a journey. This is a model of stagnation, with no growth potential inherent in such a process. We call these people “Vindicators,” because their worldviews are established solely to vindicate their pre-existing

ethnocentrism and stereotypes, not to challenge them and grow.

The world of the voyager is neither a panacea nor utopia. These processes do not ensure that we will all live happily ever after, and enjoy and like all cultural differences we come into contact with. After critically thinking about an episode or event, you might indeed come to the conclusion that someone is morally wrong, or just plain rude or selfish. Understanding the differences and appreciating their origin and meaning to other's lives does not mean that one has to like those differences, or accept them for oneself. What is important are not the conclusions we arrive at, but the process by which we arrive at them. The distinction between a voyager and a vindicator is not in their conclusions, but in the processes they engage to draw their conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

Communication is a rich and complex process that involves multiple messages sent via multiple signal systems. Culture has a pervasive influence on the encoding of both verbal and nonverbal signals, and the decoding of those signals. Because of this influence, conflict and misunderstanding is inevitable in intercultural communication, and to overcome these obstacles, a personal growth model focusing on emotion regulation, critical thinking, and openness and flexibility is necessary. Individuals who can engage in these processes can further themselves on a model of intercultural development; we call them Voyagers. Individuals who cannot engage in these processes are stuck in their development, choosing instead to continually reaffirm their limited view of the world and others; we call them Vindicators.

The information we have provided is a blend of theory and research from communication and psychology. We believe that our views on the role of emotion, critical thinking, and openness in effective intercultural communication are unique, filling an impor-



tant void in our understanding of the development of ICC. While many models of ICC have focused on cognitive aspects of communication, we focus on the emotional aspects of conflict resolution. Indeed, we believe that no matter how complex or advanced our cognitive understanding of culture and communication are, this understanding does no good if we cannot regulate emotions that inevitably occur in intercultural communication episodes. We hope you leave this article as a voyager and not as a vindicator, and use this knowledge and information not only in your academic work, but also in your own, everyday, personal lives.

#### Author Notes

David Matsumoto, Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA, 94132.

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Correspondence concerning this article can be sent to David Matsumoto, Department of Psychology, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA, 94132, telephone (415) 338-1114, fax (415) 338-2584, or e-mail (dm@sfsu.edu).

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