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ONE

Why Communicate across Cultures?

The most universal quality is diversity.
—MONTAIGNE, 1580

Isolated cultures stagnate; cultures that communicate with others evolve. —T. SOWELL, *RACE AND CULTURE* 1994

INTERCULTURAL INTERFACE

A well-dressed Mexican pulled up in a taxi to the Palacio de Justicia in Lima, Peru. Armed guards were standing on the steps ascending to the building. The passenger paid and thanked the driver and opened the door of the cab, intent on the information he had come to get. As he leaned forward and put one foot onto the pavement, a cold rifle muzzle jabbed him in the temple and jerked his attention to matters at hand. The Peruvian guard holding the rifle shot two harsh words at him. The Mexican reddened, emerged from the taxi, and drew himself erect. With a sweep of his arm, he retorted three words: "¡Qué! ¿Nos conocemos?" (What! Do we know each other?) With a half bow the guard lowered the rifle and courteously gestured the man up the steps, speaking in deferential tones. What happened here? What did the guard with the gun say that triggered this reaction from the Mexican? And what in the Mexican visitor's behavior and

those three Spanish words instantly changed the Peruvian guard's attitude and demeanor?

IN SPITE OF OURSELVES

We cannot not communicate. All behavior is communication, and we cannot not behave.[1]

Even a person who does not want to "communicate"—who sits huddled with arms folded and head down—communicates that he is trying to avoid communication. By nature, communication is a system of behavior.[2] And because different cultures often demand very different behaviors, intercultural communication is more complex than communication between persons of the same culture.[3] All communication takes place in the matrix of culture, therefore difference in culture is the primary obstacle to intercultural communication.

Communication specialists estimate that two-thirds to three-fourths of all communication is nonverbal. The average varies from culture to culture, but what this statistic essentially means is that a person communicates in great part by nonverbal behavior, behavior being gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, dress, body language, the rituals (such as courtesies) one observes, etc. Our culture teaches us our behavior from birth, and most of our behavior is unconscious. Therefore—in addition to the words that we intentionally use—through our behavior we unconsciously communicate during all of the waking hours that we spend with other human beings. We "speak" volumes outside of our awareness and often in spite of our conscious choices.

Although our verbal language comes to us naturally, only the most ethnocentric can believe that their own is a "natural" language and that other societies speak some distortion of it. Yet, when it comes to the nonverbal language of behavior, most people believe that their own is a natural form of communication that foreign people have learned badly, not evolved to, or lost.[4] If we understand that we need to translate verbal language, we should be able to understand that we also need to translate nonverbal language.

THE CULTURE GRIP

Most of us probably think of ourselves as persons who operate through our own free will. Much of the time, however, this is not true.

The Mexican visitor and the Peruvian guard participated in a communication exchange that was deeply embedded in the hierarchy and formality inherent in Mediterranean-based cultures. With the interrogation, "¿Que quieres?" (What do you want?), the guard had addressed the visitor with the familiar verb form in Spanish. The familiar form of address in most Spanish-speaking countries is used only with family members, close friends, former classmates, or children. The reflexive reaction of the man arriving was indignation, even though the circumstances were dangerous. His retort "Do we know each other?" was a powerful cultural rebuke. The automatic response of the guard was to amend his discourtesy and reply in the formal style of address for the visitor to please go about his business. Fortunately for the Mexican visitor, this incident turned out well. He would not have responded in such a manner if he had stopped to think about the logic of challenging a gun with indignation and three Spanish words—but the point is that he did not think. Cultural conditioning controlled the behavior of both men, including he who held the gun and the apparent power. Neither man went through a conscious thought process.

Our behavior is taught to us from birth, and it is taught to us so that we will conform to the culture in which we live. We learn when to speak up and when to keep quiet. We learn that certain facial expressions meet with approval and others provoke a reprimand. We are taught which gestures are acceptable and which are not, and whether we can publicly unwrap a gift; we learn where to put our hands when at the table, whether or not we can make noise with our mouths when we eat, which utensils to use or not use, whether toothpicks are acceptable and, if so, in what fashion we may use them. We learn how to address people in a manner approved by our culture, what tone of voice to use, what posture is censored and what is praised, when and how to make eye contact and for how long, and countless other things that would be impossible to consciously remember and use all at the same time when interacting socially.

This behavior is learned so well—so that we can pass social scrutiny by the ever-alert antennae of our peers and be admitted to their group—that the behavior becomes internalized below the level of our conscious thought. We operate in great part on this elaborately written subconscious program, leaving only a small percentage of our actions to be governed by conscious choice and thought. We most often become aware of the subconscious behavior that we expect from ourselves and therefore from others when someone *violates* the pattern that we have come to expect. Such a violation raises our internalized rules to a conscious level of awareness.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

From culture to culture the proportion of nonverbal behavioral communication varies relative to the verbal communication that is used. Communication styles that focus relatively more on words to communicate and less on behavior—the context in which the words are used—are said to be "low-context." "High-context" cultures, in contrast, rely relatively more on nonverbal context or behaviors than they rely on abstract, verbal symbols of meaning. The difference in style is similar to that of time being conveyed to the second by the precise, numeric display of a digital watch, as compared to telling time by the halting movement of the hands of an analog grandfather clock. This dissimilarity in communication styles between low- and high-context cultures creates frequent, significant obstacles to intercultural communication.

A high-context message is one in which more of the information is contained in the physical context or internalized in the person receiving it, and less in the coded, explicit, transmitted verbal part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite. The focus is on vesting more of the information in the explicit verbal code.[5]

Low-context communication can be compared to interfacing with a computer. It is a system of explicit prompt and response exchanges. If the computer does not read an inaccurate response's programming, then it does not compute. North Americans have a low-context communication style and intend to transmit their messages primarily in words spoken, which are amplified or overridden relatively less than in many other cultures by nonverbal signals such as gestures, silence, eye contact,[6] or ritual.

Thus a low-context person consciously focuses on words to communicate, but a high-context person is acculturated from birth to send and receive a large proportion of messages through behavioral context, both consciously and unconsciously. When this high-context person receives a verbal message from a low-context person, misunderstanding is necessarily created when the high-context person erroneously attributes meaning to nonverbal context when such meaning is not intended. This same high-context person will then, in turn, communicate much by context along with a verbal message. The low-context person may not apprehend, much less understand, much of the contextual nonverbal message that is being expressed. The low-context person relies primarily on words themselves for meaning when, in fact, the context probably contains the real message.

The distinction between high- and low-context cultures does not mean that context is meaningless in low-context cultures. It means that culture dictates a large variation in degree of importance of the context to communicative meaning.[7]

READING THE SIGNS

In many societies with a high-context communication style, such as Japan or Mexico, it is considered impolite to respond with "no" to a request. The courteous response of "maybe" or "I will try" is clearly understood as "no" to a person familiar with that culture and contextual ritual. A person from a low-context culture will typically ignore the ritual (context) because he is accustomed to focusing on the words. He takes the words spoken literally and treats them as being information specific. This low-context person is then incensed or offended when he does not get what he expects. If he protests, the high-context person cannot understand why the low-context person wants to force a rude response, or why the low-context person is being rude by insisting.

When an Occidental moves to French Polynesia, she may be frustrated at receiving what appears to be no response at all when asking a question of a Polynesian. It may be days or months (or never), before she realizes that the person addressed has just responded "yes" by an almost imperceptible raising of the eyebrows. Though she would understand the nodding of the head that by convention signals assent in many Western cultures, she relies on words and does not even see the subtle, unfamiliar nonverbal reply. Moreover, before she becomes familiar with Polynesian culture, she would not know how to interpret the answer correctly if she did notice it. In Greece, for example, the same eyebrow "flash"[8] means no. Even so, some nonverbal messages are obvious. Clearly a different message is sent and received by the delivery of a bouquet of roses than by the delivery of a person's severed ear.

One cannot rely on the similarity of communication styles between two Western cultures, nor even on the similarity of styles between two Spanish-speaking countries. There are, for example, many differences between Colombian and Venezuelan cultures. Colombia is very formal; hierarchy (class) is paramount. In comparison, Venezuela is more informal. Venezuelans make a point of being equal to persons in high or important positions. They more commonly use the familiar *tu* form to address each other than do many

other Spanish-speakers. This difference may have evolved because of Venezuela's oil production, which raised living standards and afforded more public education, making the general public here less class conscious than that in Colombia.[9]

North American writers, diplomats, soldiers, and tourists traveling in Europe after World War II found that many of the people they dealt with spoke English. It was easy to assume that everybody attached the same meanings to the same words in the same language and that Europeans and North Americans understood each other. But it quickly became apparent that, because of differences in culture and in daily activities and practices, a common language did not necessarily facilitate communication or comprehension.[10]

Today we come into contact with cultures that are foreign to us more than ever before. Technology has expanded contact between cultures in the postmodern world beyond traditional boundaries, thereby creating an urgent need to focus on intercultural communication.[11] We have become so mobile that distances no longer matter,[12] and we no longer have a national economy. The United States' economy now engages the economies of all other developed nations at a global level.[13]

Alvin Toffler wrote that "the transnational corporation . . . may do research in one country, manufacture components in another, assemble them in a third, sell the manufactured goods in a fourth, deposit its surplus funds in a fifth, and so on."[14]

THE OBSTACLE COURSE

Our global village is turning out to be an unstable and often unfriendly place, with ethnic nationalisms taking center stage.[15] Competent, effective intercultural communication has become critical for our well-being and survival. Individuals and organizations struggle to cope with problems in living and working with people of other cultures[16] on a daily basis. And in the accelerating pace of face-to-face and technologically facilitated interaction, it becomes ever more desirable to achieve intercultural communication competency as quickly as possible.

In order to increase our much-needed intercultural communication competency, it is helpful to know what kinds of obstacles commonly occur when we attempt to arrive at acceptable shared meaning across any cultural boundary. Recognizing potential obstacles will help avoid, overcome, or steer around potential pitfalls. To proceed on this course, we need to define some terms that will be used:

Intercultural: A macrodefinition of "intercultural" is used, indicating one or several differences between communicators relating to language, national origin, race, or ethnicity, rather than a microdefinition that, for example, might indicate the difference in "culture" between the Women's Bar Association and a local electricians' union in the United States, or between a group of engineers and a group of musicians. This book addresses the obstacles in communicating across cultures that are *inter*national, rather than targeting diverse, *intra*national subcultures (sometimes called cocultures) that share the experience of living in the same polity, such as the United States of America. More precisely, the term "intercultural communication" shall mean an international "transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures."[17]

Cross-cultural: This term will be synonymous with intercultural.

Etic: Etic is a communication term that means viewed from an external, *inter*cultural perspective, that is, culture-general. The word "etic" was coined by United States linguist Kenneth L. Pike by extraction from the word phonetic, and the word's pronunciation rhymes with "phonetic." Etic refers to cultural characteristics that pertain to, or are raw data of, a language or other area of behavior, without considering the data as significant units functioning within a system. "The etic view is an alien view—the structuring of an outsider."[18] The etic view can tell us that a certain tribe pierces nose, ears, and lips to wear bone and shell adornments—a list of alien behavioral characteristics.

Emic: Emic is a communication term that means viewed from an internal, *intra*cultural perspective, that is, culture-specific. The word "emic" also was coined by Pike and was extracted from the word phonemic. Its pronunciation rhymes with "anemic." Emic refers to cultural characteristics that pertain to or are a significant unit that functions in contrast with other units in a language or other system of behavior. "The emic view is monocultural, with its units derived from the internal functional relations of only one . . . culture at a time."[19] An emic view can show how the wearing of certain bone and shell adornments by members of a given tribe clearly labels members as to their rank, rights, wealth, and marriage eligibility, and is used by the culture to order daily interaction. The emic view *explains* alien behavioral characteristics.

North American: This term will refer to an English-speaking citizen of the United States of America (not a Canadian or Mexican) who is an anglophone. Often this will be a North American of northern European origin, but the term European American seems more awkward and would exclude true anglophones of other heritages. An anglophone of northern European origin is sometimes called an "anglo," but this term has a different connotation than anglophone. One should note that Mexico is in North America, and that residents of Mexico, Central America, and South America all live in the "Americas," and are therefore Americans. When interacting with countries of the Americas, rather than saying "I am an American," a citizen of the United States of America can more precisely refer to him- or herself in Spanish as a North American. It is better still in Spanish to use *estadounidense,* which is taken to mean a citizen of the United States of America even though the full names of a number of countries in the Americas begin with "United States."

In our quest for increased understanding, using a list of the types of obstacles that most commonly arise when attempting to communicate across cultures will give us a practical, etic template to apply to a specific foreign culture. Looking at the selected culture from the outside, we can go down the list of the categories in which breakdowns commonly occur. We can consider each category to see if it appears to be an area that impedes communication between our own and the target culture.

However, we also need to emically examine the internal cultural system of the "other" culture. Other societies frequently mandate verbal and nonverbal behavior for daily situations of personal interaction that are quite different from what is prescribed and considered appropriate in one's own. We will, of course, easily recognize prescribed verbal and nonverbal behavior that differs from the norms of our own culture. We can then increase our understanding of behavior that seems foreign or inappropriate by trying to comprehend the function within a given culture of the behavioral units that we question.

THE STAGNATION OF ISOLATION

Different cultures in the world have developed different skills according to the time, place, and circumstance in which they unfold, because cultural features evolve to serve a social purpose. The result today is that different people may confront in different ways, with varying degrees of effectiveness, the same challenges and opportunities, because cultures differ in their relative effectiveness for particular purposes.[20] Persons with diverse viewpoints must communicate in order to set conditions under which all can flourish[21] and to profit from the exchange of efficient ways of dealing with life circumstances. Sociologist Thomas Sowell points out that, historically, the Balkanization of peoples into small and isolated groups has resulted in cultural retardation.[22] Further, human tolerance suffers as communication declines.[23] It is imperative that cultures be able to communicate with each other for practical reasons.

We will all benefit from intercultural communication, for over the millennia of human history, cross-cultural experiences have been associated with a society's achievement.[24] Throughout history, cultures have beneficially crossed in the world's great trading centers. They also cross through migration. Today we can see this tendency toward achievement in "immigrant nations" such as the United States, Australia, and Brazil. These nations exhibit social and economic dynamism, optimism, and adaptability that are rare among societies that are more closed. Immigrants bringing a foreign culture affect the nation that receives them, even while the receiving nation in turn reshapes the immigrants.[25]

In setting out to cross cultural boundaries, and before examining potential pitfalls, we need first to begin with a map of cultural territory.

TWO

What Constitutes a Culture?

Culture is communication and communication is culture.[1]

The plane finally landed in Tokyo, after the long flight from the West Coast of the United States. Annie Nimos had changed into fresh business clothes before arrival, because she would be met by the owner of the firm with whom she had corresponded for a year for her import business. She had placed several orders by correspondence, and business had gone smoothly, but this would be the first time she and the owner would meet. After finally getting through customs, she saw a gentleman with a sign in his hand that said "Mrs. Nimos" and made her way toward him. Tanaka-San, the owner of the firm, as well as another man and woman who were employees, had come to meet her. There were bows and *herros*, and the younger man stepped forward to offer to carry her laptop computer. She started slightly when he greeted her: "Hello. Welcome to Tokyo. How old are you?"

COMMUNICATING WITH THE OTHER

Some communication specialists propose that all communication is intercultural,[2] because there are microcultural differences between one family and another, or even idio-cultural differences between two persons. But this is not a useful stance in the attempt to communicate successfully across

national cultures, as culture is commonly defined. The act of understanding and being understood is more complex in a broad intercultural range than in a narrow intracultural situation. The variables of mind, senses, and medium are, in part or great measure, the products of the communicator's particular culture.[3] Further, cultural differences present greater obstacles to communication than do linguistic differences.[4]

Although Mrs. Nimos had had contact with diverse cultures in South America and in Europe, this was her first trip to Japan. The personal question as to her age caught her off guard, because in the West such a question would be considered intrusive and offensive. After momentary hesitation she told the young man her age. He nodded and seemed satisfied, maybe because she was older than he had expected. Later in the visit, reflecting on her welcome at the airport, she was able to relate the question about her age to the importance of hierarchy in Japan. Age is an important factor in situating a person in the Japanese cultural hierarchy. For her Japanese business counterparts to feel comfortable that they knew the proper way to address and to relate to her, they needed to know her age.

In a later conversation, at a dinner with several Chinese students working on doctoral degrees in the United States, Mrs. Nimos recounted her experience in Japan, seeking another Asian perspective. On hearing the story, the men nodded instantly with understanding and said that age is important for the same reason in China. However, they elaborated, when communicating with family members generation becomes an important factor that overrides age. Xu Lia explained that he has an uncle who is almost the same age as he and a cousin who is twenty years older. Xu Lia must address the young uncle with the respect accorded to the older generation in the family, and he addresses the older cousin as a peer because the cousin is of the same generation as Xu Lia.[5]

We can best understand intercultural communication as cultural variance in the perception of social objects and events.[6] The differences commonly defined as cultural include language, nationality, ethnicity, values, and customs. And although communication between subcultures or microcultures within a given polity is not our focus, understanding how barriers to communication arise because of cultural differences certainly will increase one's communication skills with all people.

The elimination of geographic and social barriers by current communication technology constantly crosses cultural boundaries and confronts us with the Other, one who is other than us, in some way alien and diverse.[7]

Communicating with the Other may be the key to our survival,[8] and the identity and attributes of the Other are rooted in culture.[9] Central, then, to the issue of intercultural communication is the concept of what constitutes a culture.

CONCEPT OF CULTURE

There are many concepts of culture, ranging from the simple to the complex:

1. Culture is just "the way we do things around here."[10] Culture is the set of norms by which things are run—or simply "are."[11]
2. Culture is the logic by which we give order to the world.[12]
3. Culture refers to "knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concepts of self, the universe and self-universe, relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations, and time concepts" accumulated by a large group of people over generations through individual and group effort. "Culture manifests itself both in patterns of language and thought, and in forms of activity and behavior."[13] Culture filters communication.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall, in his catalyzing work *The Silent Language,* states that culture is not one thing, but rather a complex series of interrelated activities with origins deeply buried in our past. He treats culture in its entirety as a form of communication. Culture is communication and communication is culture.[14] In a living, dynamic circle, culture governs communication and communication creates, reinforces, and re-creates culture.

Even though humans may be the only animals to have culture, they are not the first to be social. They did not, in their special wisdom, invent society. Even the earliest complex animals were born into a social system to which they had to adapt if they were to subsist. Society is an adaptive necessity for human existence, and communication is the system of co-adaptation that sustains society. However, we need to remember that even though communication is necessary to sustain life, other peoples who do not communicate precisely as we do, do not immediately die.[15]

Human communication contains two kinds of messages. The first is intermittent in occurrence and can be referred to as the new informational aspect. The other is the continuous, relational aspect of interpersonal communication. The conveyance of new information is no more important than

the relational aspect of communication, because the latter keeps the communication system in operation and regulates the interaction process. Communication in the broadest sense is the active aspect of cultural structure.[16] The information content of communication often takes the form of a low-context verbal message, and the relational aspect is more often communicated nonverbally as a contextual metamessage.[17]

To understand how humans adapt to their society, we can conceptually break down the social system of a culture into units of prescribed behavior for given situations. Hall characterizes these units as situational frames in society. A situational frame is the smallest viable unit of a culture that can be "analyzed, taught, transmitted, and handed down" as a complete entity. Examples of such units might be "greeting," "gift-giving," "introductions," "eye contact," and "table manners." As children, we start learning in units the behavior for each situation that is considered appropriate for our culture. These situational units are culture's building blocks, and they contain social, temporal, proxemic, kinesic, linguistic, personality, and other components. Since we can more easily learn a new culture by using manageable analytic units,[18] looking at common cultural "situations"—the units that differ from culture to culture and constitute potential obstacles—can aid us in achieving effective intercultural communication.

Difference in the situational units of a culture creates communication obstacles in the *process* of verbal and nonverbal interaction between persons. But since culture as a whole gives rise to obstacles of *perception*, it is also imperative to broadly consider cultural information such as history, religion, form of government, preconceptions, and values.

Culture gives humans their identity. It is the total communication framework for words, actions, body language, emblems (gestures), intonation, facial expressions, for the way one handles time, space, and materials, and for the way one works, makes love, plays, and so on. All these things and more are complete communication systems. Meanings can only be read correctly if one is familiar with these units of behavior in their cultural context.[19]

Anything that can properly be called cultural is learned, not hereditary.[20] But these learned ways of interacting gradually sink below the surface of the mind and become hidden controls that are experienced as innate because they are ubiquitous and habitual. Culture organizes the psyche, how people look at things, behave, make decisions, order priorities, and even how they think.[21]

We are, all of us, already cultural experts, but we are experts in our own cultures and almost totally at a subconscious level. Our trained subcon-

scious antennae can read insincerity when words and nonverbal communication are incongruent, and we can anticipate aggressive actions from subtle cues. But this same finely tuned sub-subconscious interpretative ability will misread cues that have a different meaning in another culture, and when this happens we have a reaction based on misinformation, often without our being aware of the mechanics leading to our response.

Our own cultural maps are so familiar, like a home neighborhood, that we do not need to make them explicit; it is only in foreign cultural territory that we need an externalized map.[22] When one can successfully describe an informal pattern in a culture, then others in the same culture can immediately recognize it because they already have acquired this pattern. By explicitly putting cultural patterns or rules into words, these informal and subconscious patterns can be more easily taught.[23] In fact, the only important process in the survival of cultures is transmission,[24] i.e., communication.

Although culture is learned, Hall points out that it is very difficult for culture X to teach culture Y to use nonverbal communication forms, because all groups tend to interpret their own nonverbal communication patterns as universal.[25] We constantly and silently communicate our real feelings in the language of nonverbal behavior, which is elaborately patterned by our culture.[26]

Consequently, to communicate across cultures, we need formal training not only in the language but also in the history, government, and customs of the target culture, with at least an introduction to its nonverbal language.[27] Humans are linked to each other through hierarchies of rhythms of language and body movement that are culture-specific. We cannot adequately describe a culture solely from the inside without reference to the outside, nor vice-versa,[28] which dictates an etic-emic approach.

CULTURE IS NORMATIVE

As children, we learn through subliminal, but clearly discrete, signals the directives, the prohibitions, the encouragements, and the warnings that govern our consistent association with other members of our society. Our systems of verbal and body-motion languages are flexible and malleable, but they are adaptive and functional only because they are systematically organized.[29]

Every society seems to have strict normative regulations of communication, a kind of communication traffic order.[30] In fact, all human behavior is

subject to normative social control, and each bit of behavior (Hall's situational unit) becomes an element in a code. This normative structure is what gives human behavior its communicative power.[31] One communicates by how one adheres to or deviates from the norm. The particular set of rules that transforms a person into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters.[32] However, we should bear in mind that at some time in history some culture has justified or condemned every conceivable human action.

When a person is born into a society, a system already exists into which the person must be assimilated if the society is to sustain itself. If the person's behavior does not become predictable to the degree expected, then he or she must be accorded special treatment, which can range from deification to incarceration. In some societies the person who does not assimilate will be allowed to die. Ultimately the goal is to make the person's behavior predictable enough that society can go about the rest of its business. In every society, in order to attain membership, a person must gain control of the pattern of, and be incorporated into, the society's communication system.[33]

Human communities select their cultural institutions from a great range of possibilities; the resulting configuration of choices from this matrix makes up the pattern of a culture, and patterning is what gives culture its intelligibility.[34] These cultural patterns are unique, not universal, but human beings have difficulty getting outside their own cultural skins in order to see this. To communicate effectively across cultures, we need to increase our understanding of our own unconscious culture.[35]

DEVIATION FROM CULTURAL NORMS

There is a public order. All of our interactions with others are governed by a learned set of rules—our cultural pattern—most of which unconsciously guide our behavior and consequently affect our communication. We draw on our learned rules to understand others' behavior.[36] Interacting through verbal and nonverbal language usage (what is said when, how it is phrased, and how one coordinates language with nonverbal signs) is not simply a matter of free choice; such usage is affected by subconscious and internal constraints that lie out of our immediate awareness.[37] We are sharply conscious of another's deviation from these rules—and we interpret meaning from such deviation. When engaging in intercultural communication, we

often cannot understand the meaning of another's comportment, and we know that we do not understand. A yet greater peril to misunderstanding occurs when we think we understand and do not. We misinterpret. We can misinterpret such things as the dynamics of turn-taking, the use of space, eye contact, and smiling, to name only a few possibilities from a potentially infinite list.

An act can be proper or improper only according to the judgment of a specific social group, and one type of socially approved act, called a negatively eventful act, is of central importance. If this type of act is not performed there will be negative sanctions, but the act goes unperceived if performed properly.[38] The part of the human nervous system that deals with social behavior works according to the principle of negative feedback. Therefore, we are consciously aware primarily of *violations* of our unconscious rules of behavior; acts in compliance with the rules go unnoticed, as do the unconscious rules themselves as long as persons comply with them. We most frequently become aware of this hidden control system when interacting with other cultures, because often such interactions do not follow our unconscious rules.[39] The great gift of intercultural interactions is the opportunity to achieve awareness of our own cultural system, which has value beyond simply having a good or bad experience with an "exotic" encounter.

Teresa, raised in South America, married a man with a French father and a Russian mother, Antonina. The newlyweds lived with the husband's parents early in the marriage. Every morning the young woman would greet her father- and mother-in-law and kiss them on the cheek, as she was accustomed to greeting her own family. On occasions when the mother-in-law was irritated with Teresa, she complained that Teresa obviously didn't like her—that she "disgusted" and "repulsed" Teresa. Teresa was surprised by the choice of words and could not identify the basis for Antonina's complaint.

Several years later Teresa realized that she was accustomed to giving a Latin-style "kiss" good-morning—a kiss on the cheek—or more accurately, a brushing of cheeks. But all of her life, in the various countries in which she lived, Antonina kissed family and friends, both men and women, in Russian fashion. This was a kiss full on the mouth, and most people with whom she interacted accommodated her style. Antonina interpreted Teresa's turning of her head and the "cheek-kiss" as avoidance because of dislike and a critical attitude. The only person Teresa kissed on the mouth was her husband. Before her realization, Teresa had not connected Antonina's accusation of "disgust" with her morning greeting and its style.

CULTURE CLASHES

Millions of North Americans traveled to Europe after World War II, and a large number of European writers, intellectuals, and students traveled to the United States. Occasionally, the opportunity to live in and learn about a different society helped shatter the preconceived stereotypes that each had about the other. But most of these transatlantic explorations and cultural exchanges led not to mutual understanding but mutual suspicion, and not to greater sophistication but greater provincialism. Most of the travelers were champions of their own culture with an inability to appreciate any country but their own or to accept another society on its own terms.[40] Simple exposure to another culture does not guarantee better intercultural communication. Such encounters may result only in culture clashes and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes.

Antonina and Teresa's greeting behavior lay below their conscious thought. Antonina reacted strongly to the negatively eventful act of avoidance of contact on the mouth because she interpreted it as judgmental. It brought Teresa's behavior to a conscious level, although Antonina seemed able to verbalize only her reaction and not its cause. For Teresa the morning greeting was not a negative event, and the ritual stayed below a conscious level. It would have been helpful if Teresa had become consciously aware of her own and Antonina's cultural conditioning earlier in the relationship, because the offense perceived by Antonina added fuel to a long-lasting fire of contention. This type of misunderstanding is typical of how cultural differences cause difficulties in intercultural communication.

Australian Jill Ker Conway, in her autobiography *True North*, recounts that she was irrationally irked by what she perceived as the inefficiency of English life, the slowness with which things got done, and the relaxed confidence of all concerned that they lived at the center of the greatest intellectual community in the world. John, her North American husband, gave her advice to help her objectively observe rather than react. He urged her "to view the British as though they were an African tribe, complete with nose rings and elaborate tattoos, delightful to observe, just as one would any other strange culture."[41] She states that, like "every émigré, I was always keeping score, somewhere in the back of my mind, weighing and assessing what was good and bad about my new situation, testing the new society against my native one."[42]

Conway writes that there are climates of the mind. "Some expatriates never arrive spiritually in the new land." The light remains foreign, and the

climate is perpetually measured by the standard of another geographic zone. The senses of sight and smell continue to be governed by the person's inner sense, always searching for the familiar sensations of childhood, just as some émigrés can never master the pronunciation of a new tongue no matter how fluently they speak it.[43]

We automatically treat what is most characteristic of our own culture (that of our youth) as though it were innate. We are automatically ethnocentric—we are thoroughly trained to be so—and we therefore think and react to anyone whose behavior differs as if that person were impolite, irresponsible, inferior, etc. We experience the behavior of another that deviates from our own unconscious cultural norms as an uncontrollable and unpredictable part of ourselves; a cultural type of identification grips us in its iron fist,[44] demanding conformity. And, as the misunderstanding between Antonina and Teresa over greeting style illustrates, a negative or positive reaction can be primarily one-way.

All societies lament the differences they encounter in others. Europeans have complained that the United States' past has little relevance to the experience of societies elsewhere on earth. The French have long believed that their culture is infinitely exportable and their history of worldwide significance. While North Americans tout their democracy, the French proclaim their civilization. The global attitudes of both nations are similarly grandiose.[45]

In dealing with other countries, many North Americans assume that all foreigners secretly wish to emulate the United States and expect them to remodel their institutions using the North American pattern. Richard Pells writes that North Americans tend to evaluate other countries by how closely they resemble the United States, including not only those nations' social institutions but also their plumbing and their kitchens.[46]

Many nations characterize a cultural difference such as the killing of one's sister for adultery as an uncivilized deviation from cultural norms. Differences as extreme as this example signal very fundamental differences in cultural patterns. In non-Westernized Arab settings the sister is a sacred link between families, and culture justifies such an act as preserving the central family institution, without which the society would perish or be radically altered.[47] Without accepting, condoning, or participating in practices unacceptable to our own cultures, understanding a different practice nonetheless aids in intercultural communication. It is true, however, that significant and fundamental cultural differences make communication difficult at best and, on some points, impossible.

DIVERSITY AND IDENTITY

In some North American subcultures, it is the practice to avoid direct eye contact with strangers in public when closer than twelve to fourteen feet. Persons belonging to a group that is used to visual involvement inside that distance will misread the avoidance of eye contact: miscuing of this type on the unconscious behavioral level is touchy and complex and in some contexts is interpreted as deliberate racism.[48] Many people from Asian and Latin American cultures avoid eye contact as a sign of respect. This is also true of many African Americans, particularly in the southern United States. Many North American employers, teachers, and similar "authority" figures interpret avoidance of eye contact as a sign of disrespect or deviousness.[49] In fact, we can picture a North American adult scolding a child who looks down: "You *look* at me when I speak to you!"—but in many parts of the world one never challenges authority by looking it in the eye.

In United States' urban centers, direct eye contact has taken new meaning among the younger generation. It acts much like a challenge to a duel and may provoke a physical altercation. The Code of Conduct signs at Universal Studio's City Walk in Los Angeles warn against "annoying others through noisy or boisterous activities or by *unnecessary staring* [author's emphasis]."[50]

An anglophone North American teacher may assume that most children want to get ahead and may try to encourage students with contests. Hispanic New Mexican children may appear lazy because they seem not to want to make the effort. This stereotype takes on new meaning when we learn that to stand out from one's peers in the Hispanic group is to place oneself in great jeopardy and is to be avoided at all costs.[51] The teacher is steeped in the individualism of North American culture; the child has been conditioned by collective Hispanic culture. Members of each group will be frustrated differently.

People as cultural beings are not masters of their fate—they are bound by hidden rules as long as they remain ignorant of the hidden norms of their culture.[52] What is closest to ourselves is what we consciously know least well.[53]

In *Not Like Us*, Richard Pells writes that North American expatriates living in Europe found the experience to be an occasion for introspection, and the opportunity not only to explore another culture but also to "rediscover" one's own. James Baldwin during his long residence in France concluded that his cultural ties were neither to Europe nor to Africa, but that his iden-

tity was inescapably North American. Other writers and intellectuals had similar epiphanies and spoke of a cultural reawakening and of their greater awareness of the strengths and deficiencies of their own North American culture.[54]

To understand and accept the ways in which the minds of those in another group work constitutes the essence of cultural understanding; a by-product of such acceptance affords a rare glimpse of the strengths and weaknesses of our own system. Transcending or freeing ourselves from the grip of unconscious culture cannot be accomplished without some such self-awareness. The real job may be to understand our own culture, and to take other cultures seriously forces us to pay attention to the details of our own.[55] We may, in fact, need each other for self-definition. How can we know what is distinctively British, French, or Mexican without describing what is peculiarly German, Italian, or Dutch? How can we know what is distinctively Latin American without defining what is North American?[56]

ETIC/EMIC APPROACHES

Since some universal skills for intercultural communication apply across all cultures,[57] we can effectively utilize an etic (culture general) approach. But we also need to employ an emic approach to produce paradigms about a specific culture,[58] and therefore we need to investigate the culture with which we plan to interact in order to pinpoint cultural differences. Increasing difference-awareness through an emic approach ideally should engender the concept that we are different from others and not always that others are different from us. Sensitizing people to the idea that differences exist is a first step in attaining intercultural communication proficiency.[59] Intercultural communication competence and culture-specific communication competence must be viewed as two separate concepts that operate simultaneously to contribute to the successful outcome of a given intercultural encounter.[60]

In examining a culture from the inside to gain as much understanding as possible, we should always be alert for any cultural differences that may potentially present communication problems but that may not seem to fit any external list of categories. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that culture is active, not static, and is continuously evolving and changing. And even though this book specifically addresses *inter*cultural communication, the concepts presented will also be useful in everyday *intra*cultural communication. Ideally, we will learn to suspend judgment about any unfamiliar or

offensive communicative behavior, verbal or nonverbal, and ask ourselves "How is this behavior useful, or how does it originate in culture?" or—perhaps occasionally—"Is this individual really just an obnoxious representative of him- or herself?"

In our own cultures, we acquire a cultural template for communication behavior that not only allows us automatically to handle routine encounters, but also consciously to adapt to new situations that arise. In addressing a foreign culture, using an etic, general approach combined with an emic, culture-specific approach will give us insight into how to arrive at acceptable shared meaning both in anticipated and unforeseen circumstances.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION OBSTACLES

The successful intercultural communication process best begins with goodwill on both sides. However, an individual's negative reactions and evaluations of a foreign culture may create intercultural communication barriers. Negative evaluations cause dislike rather than like, and avoidance rather than approach. They occur because the foreign culture deviates from the norms to which we are acculturated. These barriers are bicultural and monodirectional, reflecting unwillingness or inability to understand the norms of a foreign culture. The barriers are not necessarily reciprocal. Further, a large cultural difference may, in fact, be an absolute barrier if it violates one of a communicator's core values.[61] The isolation of women in harems and the practice of infanticide violate Western core values. Female sexual freedom violates core values of most Arab and Asian nations.

Culture is the matrix in which perception and verbal and nonverbal communication processes develop.[62] Factors in these three general communication groupings in turn affect culture as well as each other. The interrelationships are complex but can be usefully diagrammed (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Cultural Matrix

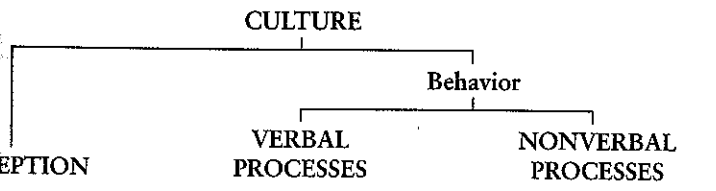

TABLE 2. Potential Obstacles to Intercultural Communication

Culture		
Perception	Behavior	
	Verbal Processes	*Nonverbal Processes*
CULTURE SPECIFIC	COMPETENCY	Chronemics (Time Sense)
Collectivism vs. Individualism	Accent	*Monochronic*
Face	Cadence	*Polychronic*
Hierarchy	Connotation	Context
History and Experience	Context	Immediacy
Master Symbols	Idiom	Kinesics (Body Motion Communication)
Power	Polite Usage	*Emblems (Gestures)*
Preconceptions	Silence	*Eye Contact*
Role	Style	*Facial Expressions*
Class		*Haptics (Touch)*
Gender	LITERACY / ORALITY	*Posture*
Rules		*Smell*
Social Organization		Proxemics (Space Sense)
Family		*Fixed-Feature Space*
Government		*Semifixed-Feature Space*
Thought Patterns		*Informal Space*
Values		Physical Characteristics
Worldview		*Artifacts (Extensions of Self)*
CULTURALLY PERSONAL		*Physical Appearance*
Adaptability		Vocalics (Speech Characteristics)
Attitude		*Vocal Characterizers*
Ethnocentrism		*Vocal Qualifiers*
Uncertainty		*Vocal Rate*
		Vocal Segregates

As a navigation tool for foreign cultural territory, an original list of "obstacles" has been gleaned from intercultural communication research and literature. These obstacles have been sorted into the three general groupings and tabulated in taxonomic form. For an overview of a dynamic culture-as-communication whole, see Table 2 for this list of categories of common potential obstacles to intercultural communication.[63]

Table 2 will serve as a map to guide us in our attempt to communicate across cultural boundaries. The next three chapters will explicate the categories of potential obstacles to intercultural communication, so that we have a better chance of anticipating and recognizing—and therefore of avoiding or surmounting—these barriers.