



INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION 2

Use this sheet to help you:

- Understand the limitations of cultural stereotyping
- Appreciate the importance of barriers to effective communication.

5 Minute Self-Test

- What is ethnocentrism?
- List some common barriers to intercultural communication

Barriers to Intercultural Communication

In the helpsheet **Intercultural Communication 1**, we argued for an understanding of culture that was dynamic and interconnected with other cultures. In this helpsheet we look at barriers to intercultural communication.

Ethnocentrism

It is quite normal to have the values of the community in which you were brought up. These are the ways in which you live your life and interact with others. They are the things you take for granted. It is not 'bad' to have Anglo Saxon Australian values or to have Hong Kong Chinese values. What is important is an understanding that your way of doing things may not be they same as everyone else's.

Ethnocentrism is a belief in the centrality of one's own culture. It often involves judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own. Bennett (1993:30) defines ethnocentrism as 'assuming that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality'. Said (1978) has described the ways in which the West has polarised East and West so that the West possesses positive characteristics (strength, activity, reliability) whereas the East is depicted as having opposing characteristics (fragility, passivity, wily unreliability). Bennett (1993) has proposed a developmental sequence towards intercultural sensitivity. His model outlines the stages which people go through when faced with the difficulties of intercultural contact. He refers to the first three stages as the ethnocentric stages of denial, defence and minimization.

Bennett's (1993) Model

The first stage is one of denial, in which a person confronted with cultural difference avoids or denies the existence of any difference. This can happen in two ways, through isolation or separation. Isolation occurs if a population is both physically separated and homogenous. In such cases, it is possible to deny the existence of any cultural differences or consider them unimportant in one's own world. Separation is the intentional construction of barriers that create distance between cultures. This separation facilitates denial. Bennett points out that one of the dangers of separation is that another culture becomes seen as less than human. An extreme example of separation is the apartheid system in South Africa, however there are many examples of a 'compound' mentality in which people physically separate themselves from those they consider different in order to maintain their own denial.

In Bennett's model, the second stage of ethnocentrism is defence. This strategy occurs as a way to counter the impact of cultural differences which are perceived as threatening. A person does this as a way of maintaining the integrity of their own worldview. The defence stage has three forms; denigration, superiority and reversal. Denigration or negative stereotyping involves attributing undesirable characteristics to everyone in a particular cultural category. The Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan are extreme versions of this form of defence but there are countless other examples of negative stereotyping. Superiority is another form of defence. It is a positive evaluation of one's own culture which does not necessarily involve denigrating others. The example that Bennett gives is that of modernisation, which tends to assume Western superiority and assumes that the aim of all developing nations is to follow the Western model. The third form of defence is reversal, which is the flip-side of superiority. It is the denigration of one's own culture and an assertion of the superiority of the other.

Minimization is the third stage of ethnocentrism. In this stage, people will seek to hide difference under cultural similarities. Part of minimization is an assumption of universal characteristics shared by all humanity. However this assumption is usually made by the dominant culture. Bennett suggests that people tend to use their own worldview to interpret other's behaviour and that the idea of a 'universal truth' is usually based on one's own values.

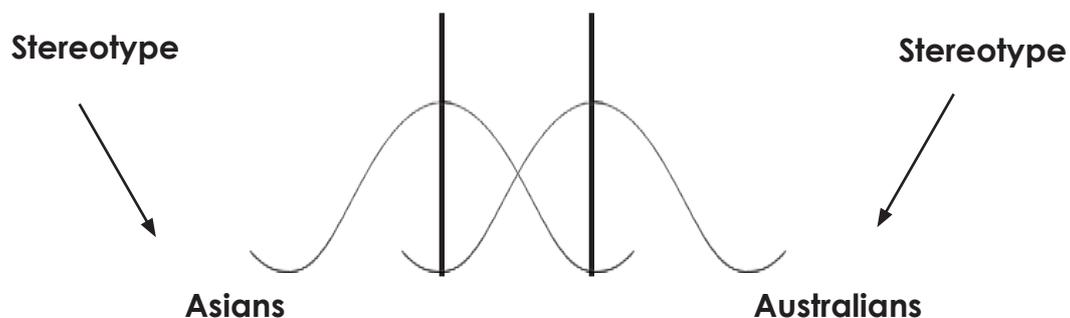
Stereotypes

As an extension of ethnocentrism, stereotypes are one of the obvious barriers to intercultural communication. Samovar & Porter (1991:280) define stereotypes as "the perceptions or beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions or attitudes". As the definition suggests, stereotypes do not develop suddenly but are formed over a period of time by our culture. They are made up of bits and pieces of information that we store and use to "make sense" of what goes on around us. Stereotypes can be either positive or negative and as (Barna, 1997) points out they help us to "make sense" of the world by categorizing and classifying people and situations we encounter. We may revert to stereotyping, for example, when we are overseas and are faced with people and situations we are not accustomed to.

While stereotyping may reduce the threat of the unknown, it interferes with our perceptions and understanding of the world, when applied to individuals or groups. Often stereotypes are problematic because they are oversimplified, overgeneralized and/or exaggerated. Statements such as "Blacks are...", "Athletes are not...", or "Women should..." are stereotypes because their content are beliefs based on half-truths or distortions about a group of people.

Jandt, (2001) identified a number of ways in which stereotypes are harmful and impede communication. First, stereotypes can cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true, when it may not be. Second, the continual use of stereotypes reinforces our beliefs and can also cause us to assume a widely held belief is true of any one individual in the group. If a group is stereotyped as dishonest, for example, we tend to apply that stereotype to all members of that group, regardless of individual differences. Third, when we use negative stereotypes to interpret the behaviour of individuals within a group, this further impedes intercultural communication by reinforcing those negative stereotypes. Such negative stereotyping can become a "self-fulfilling prophecy" for those who are stereotyped and hence place them at risk. An example of this would be the prevalent stereotype that women are not good at math and science, which in turn may cause women to internalise such beliefs and avoid studying or pursuing maths or science related professions.

The diagram below shows what happens when people develop stereotypes. Although people are spread across a broad spectrum stereotypes tend to pick up extremes which, although



Examples of Stereotyping

Adam's View

Adam is assigned to work on a group project in Principles of Marketing with Mei Ling, a Chinese student in his class. Adam has never spoken to Mei Ling before although he assumes that she would be very quiet and reserved like other Asian students and that her English would not be very good. Adam also thought that Mei Ling probably still lives at home with her parents and when she is at the university she is always studying diligently at the library. Adam has heard that Asian students are very studious, hard-working, and most are good at maths and science. In class Adam observes that Mei Ling tends to be very quiet and rarely participates in discussions. Outside of class he assumes that she spends most of her time with her Asian friends and does not seem to make much effort to get to know Australians.

While some stereotypes may have some grains of truth to them, they are over simplistic and do not present an accurate picture of any individual or group. Our stereotype of Mei Ling, for instance, suggests that she is non-English speaking, lives at home with her parents, is studious, good at math and science, is quiet, does not participate in class, and associates only with other Asian students. Now, let's take a closer look at some of these stereotypes and how they may be limited. First, it is important to reexamine the stereotype that all Asian students are alike. Students with Asian backgrounds, and particularly being ethnic Chinese, can come from a number of countries, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. Some are born or have lived in Australia all of their lives while others are from overseas.

The stereotype that Mei Ling lives at home with her parents therefore may not be the case if she is an international student. She may live alone or with relatives or live in shared accommodation with other students. Furthermore, the diverse backgrounds that Mei Ling can come from make it difficult to assume her level of English fluency. While some Asian students may struggle with English, all international students at the university of Melbourne must have a high level of competence in English in order to be admitted to the degree. Many overseas students are very fluent in English. Students from Singapore, for example, receive most of their education in English and many consider English as their first language (Volet & Renshaw, 1996).

In addition to language issues, international students may go through some period of adjustment once in Australia. This often involves not only having to adjust to the changes from going from high school to university but also going from a familiar to an unfamiliar educational and cultural environment. This period of adjustment, particularly to the Australian educational system, may explain why some Asian students tend to be quieter in class initially. It is important however not to assume this stereotyped image for all students. In fact, (Volet & Kee, 1993) in their study of Chinese students from Singapore, found that there were no significant differences between local and Singaporean students in their level of participation in class discussions. Situations where Singaporean students reported they felt more reserved than local students were in small group tutorials when there may have been only one or two other Chinese students. Also, both local and Singaporean students reported that they felt intimidated and afraid to speak up in class when one or two local students dominated the discussions. These findings suggest that there are greater similarities than differences between local and Chinese students when it comes to class participation.

Our stereotype of Mei Ling also suggests that she is hardworking and studious. While this may be the case, it is important to recognise that most university students do have to spend a considerable amount of studying. Asian students are not necessarily more studious than any other students although it may take some international students more time to study than their Australian classmates given that English is not their first language. Noi (1990) further points out that international students are full-fee paying students, and therefore, often feel enormous pressure and obligation to their parents and families to do well in their studies. The financial aspects as well as the high cultural expectation placed on educational success are often reasons why some Asian students spend more time at their books or even choose to study subjects, such as math or science, which their parents may deem suitable.

In our portrayal of Mei Ling, we also assumed that she prefers “to stick together” with other Asian students rather than get to know more local Australian students. Even though Mei Ling may associate mostly with other Asian students, this is not to say that she would not like to get to know more local Australian students. In fact, it was found that without exception international students experienced difficulties meeting Australian students although most said they would prefer to mix more with them (James & Devlin, 2001).

Mei Ling's View

Mei Ling has been paired up to work on an assignment in Principles of Marketing with Adam. She thinks about her picture of an Australian boy. She thinks he is probably loud and more interested in socialising (which includes drinking large quantities of alcohol) than studying. He probably spends more time in the U-bar than in front of the computer. She imagines that he spends more time playing football, watching TV and sleeping than he does in the library. He is probably rude, unfriendly and a bit rough. He speaks English as a first language and so finds study easy. He is independent and does as he pleases without considering his family. He has plenty of friends at Melbourne University, especially in the Faculty of Business and Economics and knows his way around Melbourne.

Now lets take Mei Ling's stereotype apart. Loudness is something that can be interpreted in a number of ways. How much and how loudly someone talks can be cultural. For Adam, the tone of his voice may be part of his idea of what it is to be a man. If he spoke too softly he may be afraid that people would think he was effeminate.

Some Australian students do spend time socialising, others work very hard. Students, often in first year find the freedom and emphasis on independent learning difficult after the structured nature of school where teachers were keeping an eye on whether they had done their work. This lack of focus can be a problem for all students, both international and local. University is a very exciting time. After years of restrictions from school and family, students at university are entering a new adult life and so take the opportunity to experiment with new things. Alcohol is part of socialising for many Australians and for most of those who choose to drink it is something that is done in moderation.

Mei Ling thinks Adam is rude, rough and unfriendly. As we discussed earlier in the sections on culture and barriers to intercultural communication, ideas about what is appropriate polite or friendly behaviour vary from culture to culture and so can be misinterpreted. Adam probably considers that his behaviour is casual and easy-going which he probably considers appropriate for contact with other students. He is also probably fairly relaxed with his tutors and even the lecturers. He is happy to call them by their first names as that is acceptable in an Australian university. He may also treat the tutors in a fairly casual way. Adam probably would not see this as rude. So while it may appear either rude or unfriendly to other people, he may be just doing what he considers the right thing.

Giving opinions, questioning and critique of the ideas presented by lecturers and tutors is something that is actively encouraged in Australian universities. While challenging the tutor may be considered disrespectful in some cultures, in Australia it is interpreted as thinking critically about the material.

The stereotype of Adam suggests that he speaks English as a first language. This may not be the case. Australia is a very ethnically diverse society and many local students at this university were either born overseas or speak English as a second or other language (or both) or have parents who speak English as a second language. Even if Adam does speak English as a first language, he does not necessarily find study easy or consider it a low priority. Many Australian students are very committed to their work but some down play it in public because it is often considered more 'cool' not to be too serious about anything.

The picture of Adam also tells us that he is independent and doesn't consider his family. Family may not be as central in Australian culture in quite the same way as it may be in many Asian cultures. However that is not to say that it is not important. Adam may be given a large degree of freedom by his parents to do 'what ever makes him happy'. Or he may have parents who put pressure on him to study law or commerce because it will be good for his career. His parents may be divorced. Or they may be happily married. He may have a distant or difficult relationship with his parents, or he may have a very happy and considerate relationship. He may live with his parents or he may live away from home.

Mei Ling also assumed that because Adam is a local student that he has plenty of friends and knows his way around Melbourne. Many local students find coming to university a lonely experience. The large numbers and the way in which people are always moving from class to class means that it is difficult for Australians to make friends too. Some people know no one when they come to university. Other students come from the country and so are unfamiliar with Melbourne and life in the city. Others may come from interstate.

Prejudice

Prejudice, like stereotypes, can be either positive or negative although it is generally referred to as "the unfair, biased, or intolerant attitudes or opinions towards another person or group simply because they belong to a specific religion, race, nationality, or another group" (Samovar and Porter, 1991: 281). A person who thinks, "I don't want (name of group) living in my neighborhood," for example, is expressing a prejudice. Again like stereotypes, prejudice involves the preconceptions of individuals or groups based on unfounded opinions, attitudes, or beliefs. Jandt's (2001: 75) definition of prejudice further elaborates the damaging effect of prejudice as "persons within the group are not viewed in terms of their individual merit but according to the superficial characteristics that make them part of the group".

Prejudice can take many forms, ranging from those that are almost impossible to detect (unintentional) to those that are clearly blatant (intentional). Brislin (1988) discusses six ways in which prejudice can express itself in intercultural communication: 1) red-neck racism, 2) symbolic racism, 3) tokenism, 4) arm's length prejudice, 5) real likes and dislikes, and 6) the familiar and unfamiliar.

Red-neck racism, which Brislin (1988: 341) maintains is found all over the world, occurs when "certain people believe that members of a given cultural group are inferior according to some imagined standard and that the group members are not worthy of decent treatment". Clear examples of this form of prejudice can be found throughout history in the treatment of indigenous groups people all over the world.

Symbolic racism, according to Brislin, is when members of one culture have negative feelings about another culture because they believe the "outside culture" is a threat to their group. For example, people may be against affirmative action programs if they believe that members of certain groups are being given preferential treatment and pose as a threat to their view of equal treatment for all.

Tokenism, on the other hand, is more difficult to detect since it often involves the harboring of negative attitudes towards members of another group. Those who harbor such feelings may even go out of their way to prove that they are not prejudice by engaging in activities to include members of the out group. Brislin cites examples of this often found in the hiring practices of large organizations where women and minorities may be used as tokens to convince administrators that their hiring practices are non-discriminatory.

Like tokenism, the fourth type of prejudice is also hard to detect as it often involves friendly behaviors with members of the out group on certain occasions, but these people are held at *arm's length* in other situations where one may be expected to be more personal. An example of this form of prejudice may be seen in our interactions at a party where more impersonal topics are discussed. In this setting, we may treat others in a very friendly manner, but this may change in other settings which may require us to be more intimate. The fifth form of prejudice, real likes and dislikes, occurs when people avoid interacting with those whose behaviors they perceive as unpleasant, unhealthy and even immoral. For example, Brislin notes that as many as 50 percent of American students indicated that they would use people's smoking habits as a reason to limit interactions with them.

Brislin's final type of prejudice, the *familiar and unfamiliar*, deals with instances when people choose to associate only with others like themselves. He cites examples of this found in most large cities around the world where people tend to seek out interactions and live near those who are from their own cultural groups. Samovar and Porter (1991) suggest that this is because human beings tend to avoid the unknown and, hence, gravitate towards what is known and familiar. Yet, as Brislin's different types of prejudice clearly illustrate, prejudice in its milder form is nevertheless prejudice and can often lead to discrimination and racist behavior. As an extreme and intentional form of prejudice, discrimination impedes intercultural communication as it involves the "unfavorable treatment and/or denial of equal treatment of individuals or groups because of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or disability" (CCMIE, 2001).

Language

Language is one of the most obvious barriers to intercultural communication but perhaps not the most fundamental. People who do not share a language or who feel that they have imperfect command of another person's language may have some difficulties communicating. There is also the possibility of misunderstandings occurring between people when they do not share a common language. However sharing a common language does not always guarantee understanding. Even speakers of the same language do not have exactly the same understanding of the meanings of words.

Even when cultures speak the same language they do not always understand one another. Americans and Australians, for example, use quite different vocabulary for some things and have different slang. An Australian once tried to buy a bus ticket in Texas and the driver asked her to speak English! This same Australian had a very embarrassing conversation with a Scotsman and could not understand a word he was saying. All these people had English as their first language!

Other ways in which language can be a barrier to intercultural communication are problems of vocabulary equivalence, idiomatic equivalence, experiential equivalence and conceptual equivalence (Jandt, 2001). Lack of vocabulary equivalence occurs when there are not words in one language that correspond precisely with the meaning of words in another. This occurs particularly with specific or very descriptive words. Jandt (2001:149) cites an example from Axtell (1994) of an English speaking business person who writes a letter to be translated into Japanese including the sentence 'we wonder if you would prepare an agenda for our meeting'. While 'wonder' is used in the sentence as a polite way of asking the Japanese to prepare the agenda, it can be translated into Japanese as 'doubt' and so the sentence would read 'We doubt that you would prepare an agenda for our meeting'. In this case a well-meaning sentence can inadvertently cause great offence.

Idiomatic equivalence can cause communication problems because although native speakers understand the meanings of an idiom, they can be difficult for a non-native speaker to understand and translated directly they can be either bizarre or meaningless. For example, 'the old man kicked the bucket' is meaningless unless you know that to "kick the bucket" means "to die".

Another problem is that of *experiential equivalence*. Objects or experiences that do not exist in one culture are difficult to translate into the language of another culture. For example, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* has no precise English equivalent although it does have connotations that can be expressed in English words such as relationship, connection, obligation and dependency.

Conceptual equivalence is a barrier for communication if ideas or concepts are not understood in the same ways in different cultures. Jandt (2001) gives the example of concepts such as freedom. Understandings of what is meant by the notion of 'freedom' in the United States may be different from what is meant in other countries.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can be a barrier to intercultural communication. Nonverbal communication is communication without words. Messages are sent through gestures, proximity, eye contact, expectations regarding time and so on. These forms of communication can easily be misinterpreted.

Jandt (2001) identifies a number of ways in which nonverbals are used to communicate messages. The first of these is replacing spoken messages. For instance it is possible to greet someone who is a long way off by waving and a police officer can direct traffic using nonverbal communication. Another use of nonverbal communication is to send uncomfortable messages. It is possible to convey the message 'I'm in a hurry and have to go' in nonverbal ways that may be less likely to hurt someone's feelings. It is also possible to tell someone you find them attractive in nonverbal ways and so avoid some of the embarrassment that would be involved if you were to say it in words. Jandt describes making status clear as another useful function that is performed more effectively by nonverbal communication as it is less threatening. He uses the example of the US where high status is demonstrated by a more relaxed posture and lower status by more rigidity.

Turn-taking in a conversation is another form of non-verbal communication. We know when it is our turn to speak by a number of signals that are not verbal. It is very rare in a conversation for someone to actually tell us (in words) when it is our turn and how long we have to speak. However, there are signals that tell us and these signals vary between cultures.

Another use of nonverbal communication is to *reinforce or modify a verbal message*. It is possible to indicate something about the verbal message by a nonverbal gesture. For example, gesturing someone to come or waving as well as speaking a greeting.

Nonverbal messages can take a number of forms. Some of these are our use of personal space; gestures, facial movements and eye contact; use of time and use of touch. Other important non verbal messages can involve interpretations of the meanings of silence, clothing, the arrangement of space and furniture and so on. Because the meanings which are attached to all these things differ from one culture to another, it is possible to misread the message.

There are a number of examples of ways in which nonverbal messages can be misinterpreted. Some of these are outlined below:

- The distance that one would stand when talking to a stranger varies from culture to culture and someone breaking these unspoken rules makes us very uncomfortable.
- Gestures and eye contact can have very powerful meanings yet these meanings can vary across cultures. In some cultures, the appropriate greeting is a handshake, in others a bow, in others an embrace. Jandt refers to the circular forefinger and thumb gesture which in the US means ok. In France it can mean zero or worthless and in Brazil it is an extremely obscene gesture. Eye contact is also something that varies across cultures. Jandt cites a study which found that Arabs, Latin Americans and Southern Europeans look into the eyes of conversational partners whereas Asians and Northern Europeans only use a peripheral gaze or no gaze at all. In Australia, if no eye contact is made with someone it is assumed that the person is shy, uninterested or untrustworthy. If eye contact is too prolonged, it is interpreted as very high interest, and between males and females, as sexual interest.
- Some cultures understand time as cyclical, others view it as linear. Our use of time also varies. What a 10.30 business appointment means and whether or how long you should be kept waiting can vary from culture to culture.
- Silence has different meanings for different cultures. For some cultures, silence can indicate respect. The Chinese have a saying 'Silence is golden ...' In Australia, silence can often be interpreted as either shyness or lack of interest.
- Touch has different meanings in different cultures. Jandt gives an example from Thailand and Laos where it is rude for strangers to touch the top of a child's head because the head is the home of the spirit or soul. In western countries it is very common to affectionately touch the top of a child's head. In many countries, friends of the same sex will walk hand in hand or arm in arm. In Australia this can be seen as indicating a romantic relationship.

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The term of "culture", "intercultural communication" are main part of modern developing society. Through rapidly development of world, culture is going to change in our daily life. This variation can be delivered about, including growth, progress, evolution, reform, innovation, revivalism, revolution, diffusion, modernization and transformation. Hereby, modernization could be appeared as adoption of broadening era confidences and practices, such as science, industry, democracy, and the idea of progress. Intercultural communication is an important factor in today's globalized world. People travel and they need to communicate, in most cases, it's out of one's culture. Culture is combining with each other gradually. Sharing information with people belonging to different cultures is known as intercultural communication or cross-cultural communication. People who have to deal with other cultures, face a problem of intercultural communication. In the discipline of communication, intercultural communication competence (ICC) has been a subject of study for more than five decades. Over this time, many have identified a number of variables that contribute. Enhancing the development of intercultural communicative competence in business and study environments explores the development of intercultural communicative competence in English language teacher training and management.