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Issues in Cross-Cultural Communication

By Grace C. Cooper

A teacher once told a tale of how difficult a time she had had in teaching American-Indian pupils at a Navajo reservation. The children would not volunteer answers to questions and would not respond to questions when called upon; they were all failing their courses. When she asked her fellow white American teachers if they had experienced a similar situation, and if they had suggestions to solve the problem, she was told: "These people are just slow; you can't teach them much."

But when the teacher spoke to a tribal elder, she understood the reason for the pupils' behavior. In the Navajo culture, competition is frowned upon. If a student were to volunteer or even speak out in response to a class question, he would be rude to his peers; he would be flaunting his knowledge, making himself look better than they, violating a credo of his culture. By changing her teaching methods, the teacher was able to demonstrate that her pupils were indeed as capable of learning as other pupils.

The above illustrates a dilemma in cross-cultural communication: Whether to impose one's cultural practices and values over others. The basic overriding issue in cross-cultural communication is whether one or the other group should change its practices to adapt to the other's practices or whether there should be mutual respect for divergence. In the above recounting, the views of competition held by the Navajo and their teachers were at opposite ends of the value continuum. What was viewed as highly desirable by the teachers was viewed as highly undesirable by the Native Americans.

Another difference that can cause problems in communication across cultures is differing views of what constitutes status in a society. In his 1959 book, *The Silent Language*, E. T. Hall tells of an American scholar who, sent to Japan to teach American history to Japanese university professors, unknowingly insulted his students—and thus affected their retention of his lectures—by requesting an interpreter. The American could not speak Japanese,

but he did not realize that the ability to speak English is a sign of an educated person in Japan, and the Japanese professors certainly considered themselves among the highly educated.

Another example of different ideas of status is seen in Ama Aidoo's short story, "For Whom Things Did Not Change." In the tale, a young man comes to a hotel where he is waited upon by an older person. The man does not want to be waited on for he believes all men to be equal in status. But the Moslem servant does not understand what is happening, for he has spent his entire life in his role and sees the young man's behavior as strange and improper. At the end of the tale, the servant asks, "My young Master, what does 'Independence' mean?" Hence, the question: should the servant change his ways or should the young man adapt?

Dialect differences among sub-cultures are often highly stigmatized. Despite the attention given to the validity of dialect differences by linguists and researchers in other fields, some persons still view a dialect as "broken" or "bad" language. Even those who profess to accept the validity of dialects often expect that the dialect speaker will use his language only behind closed doors or will eventually eradicate it completely. Grammatical and phonological differences are most easily recognized; however, one aspect of language which interferes with communication can go unrecognized by both sides. This is the area of semantic differences. Many people recognize slang or *patois*; however, there are standard words used in standard syntax that have different connotative meanings for different groups. Black and white Americans have markedly different connotations for many words.

In studies using the semantic differential, for example, the following differences were identified:

■ Blacks viewed *black* as positive, strong, active; whites viewed *black* as bad, strong, passive. Blacks viewed

black as significantly more potent than whites.

■ *House* was positively evaluated by Blacks and neutrally evaluated by whites.

■ *Policeman* is a strongly negative term for Blacks, not for whites.

■ *Love* is seen by Blacks as less good and less potent than by whites. (D. Landis, et. al., 1976)

The above are just a few of the connotative differences in meaning between Black and white people. Who is to adjust? Is adjustment of *connotative* meanings possible? How can effective communication between groups take place unless these differences are identified?

Time is another aspect viewed differently by divergent cultures. Anglo-Americans are time conscious; to them time is a fixed entity. Being on time is very important; coming early can be a sign of respect. One American assigned to a Latin American country felt highly insulted when he had to wait 45 minutes for an appointment; the Latin American who had kept him waiting, however, had a different concept of time and felt his guest was being unreasonable in complaining. Anglos visiting Pueblo dance ceremonies are often confused by the Pueblos' time concept: the ceremonies begin when "things are ready," which can be hours after the people have begun to gather. To the Navajo, the future seems unreal, only the here and now are real. The Tiv view time as a capsule. There is time allotted for each task, and one handles one task before shifting to another. Days of the week are named for the things being sold at the market that day. (Hall, 1959). These are only a few ways of looking at time. Whose concept is to be applied in a given situation?

Space is also perceived differently by different cultures. For example, the Hopi language has no terms for interior three dimensional spaces like *hall*, *cellar*, *attic*, even though the Hopi have multi-room dwellings and special purpose rooms. The

Hopi are also very possessive of space as Hall illustrates in the anecdote about the Hopi who built his home in the middle of a well-traveled road. He had a right to the space by reason of prior possession, and Anglo-American ideas of present use of space were irrelevant to him. How can spatial ideas be recognized and worked with?

Some researchers say that the issues arising because of cultural differences in behavior are traceable to cognitive difference; that different cultural groups think differently. The theory is that there is a continuum of cognitive style from what is termed *field dependence* to what is termed *field independence*. Individuals tend to favor one cognitive style over another, and this tendency is traceable to cultural influences. The field dependent thinker is usually from a practical cultural background; he relates to the environment (field) as a whole and seldom analyzes or structures it. The field independent thinker focuses on part of a field as discrete from the surrounding field; he is usually from a technological or analytic cultural background. The field dependent thinker is socially oriented; the field independent thinker is task oriented.

In 1974, M. Ramirez and A. Castaneda wrote ("Cultural Democracy, Biocognitive Development and Education") about Mexican-Americans and how their culturally determined field sensitivity causes problems for them in academic settings. A useful section of their discussion centers on identifying the characteristics of cognitive style that can be observed in behavior. For instance, field sensitive persons like to work with others to achieve a common goal; like to assist others; are sensitive to the feelings and opinions of others; seek guidance and demonstration from their teachers, and seek rewards that strengthen the pupil-teacher relationship.

On the other hand, field independent persons prefer working alone; like to compete and gain individual recognition; are task oriented and inattentive to social environment when working; like to try new

ideas and new tasks without the teacher's direction; are impatient to begin tasks and like to finish first; seek nonsocial rewards, and generally limit interactions with the teacher to the task at hand. In addition to Mexican-Americans, there are other cultural groups within the American society who tend to be mostly field dependent. Black Americans are one such group.

Professor Basil Matthews, formerly of Howard University, has done a great deal of study of the Black cognitive process as expressed in the use of the symbolic image. [*New Directions*, April 1977.]. Matthews sees Black cognitive style reflected in a preference for the use of the concrete image and in a holistic approach to language, a description that fits the characteristics of field dependency.

At the University of the District of Columbia, faculty members tested more than 200 entering freshmen in the fall of 1978 and found that more than 90% of them were field dependent. Matthews' research examined the work of established scholars, not students, and found extensive use of imagery to convey meaning. The image is different for Black people, as traditional Western use views imagery as a stylistic device and not a primary carrier of the content of a message. In part, Matthews' ideas are drawn from Leopold Senghor's [poet-president of Senegal] 1956 message to a conference of Black writers and artists. Image and rhythm, noted Senghor, are the two fundamental features of Black style.

Although most people are quite stable in their preferred mode of cognition, it is possible to change cognitive style. (H. A. Witkin, et. al., 1977.) The idea of cognitive differences among cultures and individuals raises the issues of how to best educate and train for employment peoples of different cultures. Is a return to segregated classes or small grouping within classrooms necessary to provide proper education and training? Should emphasis be placed on developing techniques for specific cognitive styles, or should field dependent thinkers be guided toward field independence?

Rather than answer questions, this article has attempted to present an overview of the issues that arise because of diversity in communication across cultures and to provoke thought about the best approach to these issues.

Knowledge of cultural differences is of importance to educators, journalists, social service workers, diplomats—anyone who works with or comes in frequent contact with people from various cultural backgrounds. In a multi-cultural society like America, almost everyone is involved at times in cross-cultural communication issues. □

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