



Improving Relationships and Communication through Understanding One Another

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Abstract

Have you ever heard these statements? “They’re not like us.” “They don’t have our values.” “We invited them, but they’re not interested, so they don’t come.” “They just don’t care about doing better.” You may recognize these comparisons as judgment statements. Why are such statements made? Is there a lack of understanding? Do you recognize fear in any of the statements? Perhaps we fear what we do not understand. Do we interact with those we fear or do not understand? How do we break down barriers of fear and misunderstanding? First of all, a genuine desire to learn has to be come from within each individual. No one can demand, require, or force you to be interested in interacting with someone from different origins than your own. What if you wanted to reach out to someone from a different culture with educational materials or in a business prospect? With rapid population changes in the United States, as well as around the world, we have seen the importance of breaking down cultural barriers that impede interpersonal communication and trusting relationships. Yes, it seems easy enough to simply avoid anyone whom you think to be different, but it is not practical in education, service, business arenas, or in any cohesive community setting. Humans do not function in isolation. Isolation is rarely beneficial to healthful or peaceful outcomes.

Since countries grow daily in ethnic and cultural diversity, now may be the time to learn some steps towards ‘cultural pluralism’. Often called integration or multi-culturalism, cultural pluralism reflects individuals who are highly acculturated (adaptive) to more than one culture. Research and best practice suggest some preliminary actions for reaching families and individuals not living in mainstream cultures. Primarily, there must be an understanding of one’s own cultural patterns and personal bias. This begins the steps toward the comprehension of other cultural customs and paves the way for cross-cultural communication. The purpose of this workshop is to bring participants closer to clearly defining and understanding cultural patterns, learning how cultural patterns can impede the communication process, and introducing ways to improve comfort levels in building cross-cultural relationships.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, cultural patterns, pluralism, integration, acculturation

Introduction

Have you ever heard these statements? “They’re not like us.” “They don’t have our values.” “We invited them, but they’re not interested, so they don’t come.” “They just don’t care about doing better.” You may recognize these comparisons as judgment statements. Why are such statements made? Is there a lack of understanding? Do you recognize fear in any of the statements? Perhaps we fear what we do not understand. Do we interact with those we fear or do not understand? How do we break down the barriers of fear, misunderstanding, and judgment? If “they” are “not like us”, do we take the time and/or the steps to learn more about others? Hopefully, the answer is “yes”. Read on for a better understanding of why we may fear people who are different and why we may struggle with cross-cultural communication.

First, a genuine desire to learn about other cultures has to come from within each individual. No one can demand, require, or force you to be interested in interacting with someone from different origins than your own. However, what if you wanted to reach out to someone from a different culture, say, with educational materials or in a business prospect? With rapid population changes in the United States, indeed, around the world, we have seen the importance of breaking down the cultural barriers that impede interpersonal communication and trusting relationships.

Avoiding people who are different could be the easier option, but it is not practical in education, service, business arenas, or in human development. People who are isolated and have no friends or associates cannot exchange obligations or share expectations with others (Coleman, 1994). Globally, countries grow daily in ethnic, cultural, and human diversity, so now may be timely for learning some steps for moving toward “cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism reflects individuals who are highly acculturated (adaptive) to more than one culture (Valdivia, Jeanetta, Flores, Morales, & Martinez, 2012). A well-integrated community, with many distinctive populations, is marked by people who interact with one another without judgment and are more likely to appreciate different types of diversity

(human, cultural, beliefs, interests, etc.).

Research and best practice suggest some preliminary actions for reaching families, audiences, or individuals not living in “mainstream” U. S. cultures. Primarily, there must be an understanding of one’s own cultural patterns and personal biases. This begins the steps toward comprehension of other cultural customs and paves the way for cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication leads to building and/or strengthening relationships (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005).

Cultural Patterns

What is culture? Our culture is the lens through which we see the world, and it lets us know how to act within that realm by what is modeled around us. Culture is part of human identity. Humans seem to function best around others of similar identities. All humans belong to one or more cultures. It could be a work culture, a culture of religious faith, an educational culture, a culture of scooter riders, or a culture of socio-economic status. The point is that there are many cultures other than those of ethnicities or creeds. Persons can belong to many cultures and practice more than one cultural pattern. There are five questions in cultural patterns (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005):

1. What is the character of human nature?
2. What is the relationship of humankind to nature?
3. What is the orientation toward time?
4. What is the value placed on activity?
5. What is the relationship of people to each other?

Understanding cultural patterns teaches us why we have cultural biases. Understanding cultural patterns gives one a foundation for learning that another culture is not wrong, somehow lesser, or better if it is divergent from your own background or experience. Let’s explore difference and similarities across cultures. See if you can identify your own cultural pattern. Each of the cultural patterns is divided, basically, into five orientations: human nature, humans and nature, time orientation, activity

Table 1. Five Orientations of Cultural Patterns	
Human Nature	
<i>Basically evil</i>	Humans are intrinsically evil - From Puritan ancestry
<i>Mixture of good/evil</i>	Is part of the world and cannot be eliminated – needs dual approach
<i>Basically good</i>	“People are good, but society makes them evil”
Humans and Nature	
<i>Subordinate</i>	Powerful forces outside control – must accept and yield to
<i>Harmony</i>	Part of life – all things connect - not a hostile force
<i>Master of Nature</i>	Direct to our advantage, dominate - “Tame it” Structuring of markets and buyer influence
Time Orientation	
<i>Past</i>	History, traditions and religion are important Value ancestral wisdom - “Look to the past to guide the future”
<i>Present</i>	Future is vague - “Real” exists here and now - situation- bound
<i>Future</i>	U. S. Dominant, goal-bound Focus on “What is going to happen?” – Control the future
Activity Orientation	
<i>Being</i>	People, events, and ideas “flow” - “Simple act of conversation”
<i>Being-in-becoming</i>	Development, growth, spiritual life and emotional vitality
<i>Doing</i>	Activity and action, Accomplishments measured - U. S. Dominant No time to “sit and talk” - Life in constant motion
Social	
<i>Authoritarian (Linear)</i>	“Born to lead” - Others must follow - perception that this is the “norm”
<i>Collective</i>	Development, growth, spiritual life and emotional vitality
<i>Individual</i>	U.S. Constitution - Autonomous Control over one’s destiny - All else “violates the will of God”

orientation, and social orientation (adapted from Ting-Toomey, 1999). These orientations in cultural patterns are shown in Table 1.

Other cultural patterns are reflected in semantics (meaning of words as they relate to sense, reference, implication, and/or logical aspects) as influenced by regional, social, educational and/or ethnic background. Can you think of a word from your childhood that, now, has different meaning for you as an adult? Do you define certain words differently than a work colleague or a friend? Other influences on cultural patterns include geographical locations, gender, Mother Tongue, discipline (job), and family. Can you readily identify your own cultural patterns? Can our cultural patterns prevent us from reaching out to others from different backgrounds or cultures? Do our cultural patterns affect communication with those from other cultures? Let us be clear about what constitutes a culture. Think of:

- Family Systems/Structures
- Ways of Knowing
- Legacies/ Heritage
- Ethnicities
- Belief Systems
- Regionalisms
- Folkways and Mores
- Socio-economic placements
- Historical Allegiances

Working toward cultural pluralism or integration does not require one party to give up identity or belief systems. That would be more like forced assimilation. Hegemony (Flora & Flora, 2012) happens when one ethnic or economic culture dominates another, which also would be the opposite of pluralism or integration. Multi-cultural pluralistic communities have people who work in tandem with one another. Think of the parts of a gear. Two rotating cogwheels have teeth that enmesh to transmit motion. The gears do not melt into one another, rather they work in concert to move forward. They may be different, but they work together in the common goal of forward movement. If humans interact in such harmony, their communities would be at an advantage. Multi-cultural pluralistic communities

are marked by social cohesion, which is a product of adept cross-cultural communication.



Cross-Cultural Communications

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” This sentiment comes from nineteenth-century Irish playwright and likable curmudgeon George Bernard Shaw. Have you ever spoken to another person and walked away thinking that he or she understood what you said only to discover the opposite was true? If the person with whom you spoke did not understand what you said, no communication took place. The challenges of clear and understandable communication escalate when the communicators come from different backgrounds – socially, culturally, and linguistically. Understanding how we hear one another, will improve communication. Also, communication improves as relationships strengthen.

Relationships

Daniel Goleman calls it “amae”, which is a Japanese word for peoples’ attunement with one another. The stronger our human relationships, the more open and attentive we are likely to be with one another. As we build interpersonal relationships with others, whether they are “like” us or not, the notion of difference fades. Or, we may notice more difference, but the understanding of that distinction moves us toward acceptance or appreciation.

Personal Bias

Much has been written on personal attitudes

toward difference (Marofsky, 2008). To move toward cross-cultural interactions we must have an understanding of personal biases. Marofsky developed the “Tolerance Scale” in which we come to understand our own attitudes toward difference.

Appreciation: Values the difference of others and believe that difference enhances your own life.

Acceptance: Difference does not really matter to you. You tend to look for commonalities and try to ignore difference.

Tolerance: You don’t feel completely comfortable with difference. You will treat those you view as different with respect, but you would rather not have them as associates.

Avoidance: Difference clearly makes you uncomfortable. You try to avoid and do not want to work with those who are different.

Repulsion: Difference is not seen as “normal”. Working or coming in contact with those who are different causes you a lot of discomfort.

These points are not to describe a “right” or “wrong” in being. They are meant to illustrate our levels of bias. In order to understand the barriers to interpersonal communication, it is best to recognize in ourselves possible reasons for obstacles to clear and satisfying interactions.

What does this mean?

Whether we work in education, business, human service, or in our families, we all benefit from clear and comprehensible communication. At any time during interpersonal interaction or in building relationships, if we do not understand one another, or if there is judgment on one another, communication does not take place. The opportunity to build a relationship may pass as well. Learning about the origins of thought or the cultural background of others does not ask us to give up anything that we

hold dear. Learning about others enhances our abilities to interact with a wider range of people. If it is an educational message that we carry, a wider audience avails us of more people who will walk away improved for hearing our clearer communication.

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