

**INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:
ITS IMPORTANCE TO VARIOUS CAREER FIELDS
AND PERSPECTIVE BY VARIOUS AUTHORS**

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ABSTRACT

Globalization has made intercultural communication inevitable. Communicating with other cultures characterizes today's business, classroom, and community. Technology especially the internet has increased the probability that whatever is documented online will be read by someone from another culture. Intercultural communication is of importance in any career field thus the art of knowing how to communicate with other cultures should be a work place skill that is emphasized.

This is a conceptual paper whose purpose is two fold. First the paper gives a synopsis of the importance of efficient and competent intercultural communication in various career fields; namely, education, business, medicine and in counseling. Secondly, the paper presents studies and perspectives that various authors have on intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has made intercultural communication inevitable. Communicating with other cultures characterizes today's business, classroom, and community. Hence, the art of knowing how to communicate with other cultures should be a work place skill that is emphasized. Various authors have studied about intercultural communication; however their studies have diverse perspectives and emphasis. The various views give a balanced approach to intercultural communication. This paper outlines the various facets that authors have on importance of intercultural communication in the field of education, business, medicine and counseling. In addition, perspectives that various authors have on intercultural communicate are described.

PURPOSE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The primary purpose of intercultural communication is to increase understanding of culturally mediated communication phenomena. Within this goal, there are three distinct research avenues: culture specific, culture general and intercultural interaction. The “culture specific” focuses on identifying the communication behaviors of a specific culture. The “culture general” seeks to identify commonalities or universalities across cultures. A combination of both culture-specific and culture general integrates different cultures interacting hence called intercultural interaction (Zaharna, 2000).

IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TO VARIOUS CAREER FIELDS

Education relies on effective interaction between the teacher and the learners. Intercultural communication has become important because the schools are becoming more diverse culturally. In his paper, Roux (2002) argued that successful educators are effective communicators and thus culturally competent in cross-cultural encounters. Teachers should therefore be sensitive to the potentially problematic outcomes of intercultural communication in the culturally diverse class. Communication can be a useful source of intercultural knowledge and mutual enrichment between culturally diverse students if managed proactively by the teacher. Otherwise, communication could be a source of frustration, misapprehensions, intercultural conflict and ultimately school failure. Thus cross-cultural communication is complex and potentially problematic in education.

Successful communication is a prerequisite of effective transfer of knowledge in school. A rich repertoire of verbal and nonverbal behaviors appropriate to the intercultural situation as well as affective capabilities to react sensitively to fellow communicators from other cultures is a necessity in education. Obstacles to effective intercultural communication include attitudes and dispositions, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism. A rich repertoire of verbal and nonverbal behaviors appropriate to the intercultural situation as well as affective capabilities to react sensitively to fellow communicators from other cultures is a necessity in education (Linde, 1997).

The business sector is probably most affected with the issues of intercultural communication. Today with emergence of multi-national companies and global companies, it is unlikely to do business without communicating cross culturally. Targowski and Metwalli (2003) viewed this millennium as era that global organizations will increasingly focus on the critical value of cross-cultural communication process, efficiency and competence and cost of doing business. In order to successfully communicate cross culturally, knowledge and understanding of cultural factors such as values, attitudes, beliefs and behavior should be acquired. Effective cross-cultural communication in global economy provides pragmatic tools about how to define a communication strategy, train representatives and conduct business talks in order to achieve success.

Intercultural communication is also an essential component in medicine. For instance, little is known whether health care professionals communicate effectively with the ethnic minority patients. Not only language difficulties, but also cultural differences in beliefs and understanding of disease may result in problems in intercultural

communication. (Van, Harmsen and Bruijnzeels, 2002). Prasad and Darrad (2003) noted that communication with non-English speaking patients was still unsatisfactory and there is need for more research to overcome some of the barriers in the intercultural communication. Some recommendations that Prasad and Darrad suggested to health care workers is that one should have training on appropriate use of an interpreter, use pictures to explain concepts to patients, demonstrate via body language but avoid use of common gestures as they may have different cultural meanings, and schedule longer appointment with patients who may have language or cultural barriers so that the interaction is not rushed.

Interpersonal communication skills are essential to all helping relationships of cross-cultural counseling. It has been observed that ethnically distinct clients often showed therapeutic improvements when a counselor effectively acknowledged and validated clients' inner world of experiences, which was previously uncommunicated to others. Consequently, in counseling, communication process has been viewed as an intervention for client change, in and itself, and not just the medium by which a counselor applies his or her counseling approaches.

PERSPECTIVES AND STUDIES ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Various authors have studied about intercultural communication; however their studies have diverse perspectives and emphasis. This section gives a synopsis of various views that authors have presented. Some authors emphasize the issue of anxiety, others the importance of nonverbal cues in intercultural communication, others on counseling, others on power and its relation to intercultural communication. There has been conflict

on how to approach intercultural communication research and some authors have focused on this and recently the issue of technology, especially the internet, has had an impact on intercultural communication. Not much study has been done in this area but it is an interesting area to research. Looking at the various views makes one more competent and balanced in their approach to intercultural communication.

Interacting with people from different cultures or ethnic groups may involve a high degree of strangeness and a low degree of familiarity. Gudykunst (1995) argues that effective intercultural communication is partly based by one's ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty. Anxiety has to do with feeling of discomfort while uncertainty deals with an inability to predict the behavior of others. Neuliep and Ryan (1998) investigated the influence of intercultural communication apprehension, social-communicative orientation, and uncertainty. Prior to interacting with unknown partners from another culture, participants completed measures of intercultural communication apprehension and social-communicative orientation. After interacting with their partners, participants completed measures of uncertainty. It was found that intercultural communication apprehension was positively associated with uncertainty while intercultural communication apprehension was negatively correlated with social-communicative orientation.

Herring (1990) presented that nonverbal communication was really part of communication itself. Cultural misunderstandings and miscommunications can be greatly reduced by an increased awareness of cultural differences in nonverbal communication patterns. He defined nonverbal communication as behavior that transcends verbal and written words. Herring noted that many ethnic groups use nonverbal communications

more extensively than they use verbal communication especially in expressions of feeling and attitudes. Thus, counselors would enhance and clarify counseling interaction with proper identification and assessment of client's nonverbal communication. This understanding would be beneficial, for example, counselors can avoid unintentional cultural value conflicts within the counseling session. The incorporation of nonverbal communication in current and new counseling techniques could result in more appropriate and effective cross-cultural counseling.

Intercultural communication has aroused great interest in scholars over the years and some empirical studies have been done on the same. For example, Chen (2002), explored perceptions of intercultural interaction. The study addressed the connection between perceptions of intercultural interaction and intercultural communication satisfaction. Data was collected from U.S. undergraduate students shortly after they had a face-to-face conversation with an international student. A 15-item instrument was used to measure perceptions of intercultural interaction. One common aspect that was realized was the inability of the students to identify mutual topics of mutual interest. This was probably due to mutual lack of familiarity with the partner's culture. The factor was labeled "common ground" to reflect this characteristic of intercultural communication. Communication satisfaction was seen as an affective construct that reflected participant's emotional reaction toward their interaction in terms of the degree it had met or failed to meet their expectation. High communication satisfaction was predicted by competent intercultural communication.

Westwood and Ishiyama (1990) presented that effective communication alters the framework and depths of understanding of self. To illustrate this, they provided a

culturally embedded model of communication and also gave the barriers that hinder effective communication and suggested ways to overcome such barriers. Some of the practical suggestions Westwood and Ishiyama gave for overcoming some frequently occurring obstacles in cross-cultural communication are: Encourage one to speak in their own language (word and phrases) to best illustrate how they feel at the moment for ease of expression. Because non-verbal expressions are often culturally based, check with clients for accuracy of your interpretation when in doubt. Make use of other models of communication other than verbal exchange. Other examples are acting, drawing, music, and story telling. Learn culturally meaningful expressions used by clients. Pay attention to, or invite the discussion of, client's dreams and fantasies. Plan a time when clients can bring items to show, for example photos. Change the meeting place to help break monotony of just meeting in the office.

Practical considerations to better cross-cultural communication include being patient with an individual's lack of language fluency and avoid correcting linguistic errors. Persons should be encouraged to use their mother tongue to express their feelings whenever they felt limited in the host's language. It is also helpful to use a translator. Non-verbal communication like use of imagery and photos should be encouraged. Allowing patrons to teach aspects of their language and culture assists them to clarify and secure cultural identity e.g. a Chinese can be encouraged to teach Chinese painting to host culture members at a community center. This facilitates recognition of skills and accomplishments, inner strengths and positive personal qualities, humor and potential for learning new skills (Ishiyama & Westwood, 1992).

It is important for the intercultural theorist and educators to pay attention to the cultural power relations in which intercultural communication took place. According to Shi-Xu (2001), what has been overlooked is the essential power saturation of intercultural encounters. Shi-Xu observed that mainstream pedagogy of intercultural contact and communication has tended to give precedence to linguistics and cultural knowledge. Shi-Xu provided three important points that should comprise a meaningful dimension of intercultural communication. First, intercultural communication should be considered at the level of social action and not just language interpretation. Consequently it is not the understanding of words and sentences that is so important, but the social dimension that deserves critical attention. Secondly, that intercultural communication is a socially organized activity or interaction so the meaning of communication cannot be reduced to individual's words. Thirdly, intercultural communication does not take place in a power vacuum, or equal-power relations. "Intercultural communication was situated in the context of imbalance of power and inequality in resources between the east and the west, the north and the south, men and women, the majority and the minority, etc "pg 286. Shi-Xu argued that to pretend that such power dimensions are not there, or to reduce them to just linguistic issues is to render intercultural communication research and training as a mere abstract exercise. Worse still this lead to perpetuation of the western position of power and all this led to domination over and prejudice against the cultural other.

One challenge in intercultural communication emerged in the tension between cultural universalism and the issue of relativity and the role that ethnocentrism played in clouding the distinction between the two. Universalism represents the obvious similarities shared by people whatever their culture while relativism represents the unique differences

that distinguish one culture from another. The problem of ethnocentrism is that one culture views itself as better than the other culture and this hampers intercultural communication (Zaharna, 2000).

Zaharna (2000) presented that most clashes in perspectives in intercultural communication evolved around methodology or the question of the way to study this phenomenon. This has caused much debate between quantitative and qualitative researchers. The quantitative researchers sought to conquer cultural ambiguity through precision, objectivity, and reliability. The qualitative researchers on the other hand tackled cultural ambiguity through introduction of innovative methods such as narrative analysis and metaphor analysis. Only recently has contemporary intercultural communication authors recognized the complementary nature of quantitative and qualitative methods.

An area that needs to be explored is whether Internet communication has faced any cross-cultural communication difficulties. Dop (2001) did a study whose main purpose was to find out the effect that cross-cultural relations had on communicating across the internet. Dop noted that today with most offices now wired for both internet and extranet communication, email seems to be taking over most other forms of communication. Hence Dop's study was dealt with the use of email as a means of communication cross culturally and whether this form of communication had any cross cultural barrier that could be identified. The subjects of the study were Foreign Service Nations (FSN) who were citizens of a particular country, and were employed by the US government to fill positions within the American embassy in that country. The FSNs used the email frequently to communicate to Americans as part of their daily roles. The overall

conclusion of the study was that there seemed to be no problems with cross-cultural communication and relations via internet among the Foreign Service nationals. The FSNs preferred communicating via the internet than face to face communication. From the study it seems that internet communication lessened the cross cultural communication problems.

CONCLUSION

In today's workplace, the issue of intercultural communication is definitely of importance in different career fields as described in this paper. It is essential to encourage cultural and personal systems of language metaphors, worldviews and meanings in the present diversified workplace. Intercultural communication has aroused great interest in scholars over the years and some empirical studies have been done on the same. However, authors have varied perspectives and emphasis about intercultural communication. Most clashes in perspectives evolve around methodology or the question of the way to study this phenomenon. To have a balanced view of the issue, it is important to read from various authors and this paper has attempted to do so. However there is more research needed on the effect of technology on intercultural communication especially communication via Internet.

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