Culture

It is in this context that the present paper contrasts the importance of two divergent approaches to training, approaches that are either universalistic (etic) or particularistic (emic) in nature. While most extant literature on cross-cultural communication focuses primarily on culture-specific-emic-approaches, this paper stresses the value of also drawing on pan-cultural-universalistic-approaches. We illustrate the utility of such an approach through the example of " politeness" theory (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987).

Politeness is a well recognized anthropological theory (Brown & Gilman, 1991; Fraser, 1990; Hill, Sachiko, Ikuta, Kawasaki, & Ogino, 1986; Nwoye, 1992; Kasper, 1990; Ting-Toomey; 1988, 1994; Watts, Ehlich, & Ide, 1992), yet it has received no prior attention in the managerial literature. This paper is thus cross-disciplinary in nature, bringing to bear evidence from the domain of anthropology in the study of cross-cultural communication within business settings.

This paper reviews empirical research findings relative to cultural variation in politeness norms and will show how these differences can have a profound impact on the success or failure of intercultural communication in business contexts. The paper will discuss specific applications of politeness to cross-cultural managerial training and review the overall implications of using universalistic approaches to study and understand cultures. Emic Versus Etic Approaches to Cultural Analysis

Anthropologists have long distinguished between universalistic versus particularistic approaches to understanding culture (Pike, 1966; Triandis, Vassiliou, Vassiliou, Takama, & Shanmugan, 1972). For anthropologists, an approach that investigates and seeks to understand cultures in terms of universal dimensions, that is by using constructs which are universally valid and generalizable across all human cultures, is termed an etic approach.

The well-known work of Hall (1959; 1966), for instance, demonstrates how conceptions of time and of interpersonal proximity are universals in human interaction; these variables occur in, and systematically vary across, every human culture. Thus, interpersonal distance, measured as the average distance that conversational partners maintain from one another in everyday encounter, is in some cultures relatively small, measured even in inches, while other cultures maintain comparatively larger degrees of interpersonal distance.

Similarly, some cultures treat time as fixed in nature, thus placing a high value on promptness. This conceptualization and treatment of time exists in sharp (and often frustrating) contrast to other cultures where the sense of time is far looser and less binding. The common illustration of a resultant cross-cultural quandary depicts a manager from a time-conscious culture showing up for a " 10 o'clock" meeting within five minutes to the hour, while the business partner from the opposing culture, giving a far looser interpretation to time, shows up one half hour late while still believing himself to be " on time. In contrast to etic approaches, emic approaches attempt to describe and comprehend a particular culture within its unique social and historical context. Here, a culture is approached and explored as an entirely distinctive, idiosyncratic entity. For example-if we were to study Japan in all the richness of its social and historical context by delving into the evolution of Japanese customs, the multiplicity of nonverbal gestures, the complexities of Japanese language, kinship ties, patterns of child-rearing and socialization, ideological and religious systems, and so forth-such would comprise an emic approach.

The distinction between etic and emic approaches, while it has not been sufficiently underscored in the organizational literature, is crucial, for it embodies profound epistemological ramifications. Each approach carries distinctive assumptions regarding how we can come to " know" and to " study" a culture. While both approaches are valid and important, the point here is that we must come to appreciate the unique possibilities and virtues inherent within each vision of culture.

Specifically, emic approaches are valued for their ability to provide us with a " thick" description of a particular culture. Here, we are reminded of the definition of culture formulated by the famous anthropologist, Clifford Geertz. Geertz (1973) suggested that we can truly " understand" another culture only when we are able to enter into it and to completely pass ourselves off as " insiders," for instance, by mastering perfectly the linguistic system, the feelings rules, the complex rules for nonverbal gestures, etc.

This approach, while unparalleled in its ability to provide insight into a cultural system, in its extreme represents quite an arduous undertaking. Every culture is so distinctive than one would have to spend years if not a lifetime mastering its rich intricacies and nuances. Moreover, the existing literature on cross-cultural managerial communication usually takes such an ideographic, or emic, approach, focussing upon a particular target culture (e. . , Earley, 1987; Landis, Brislin, Swanner, Tseng, ; Thomas, 1985; Lefley, 1985; Leppert, 1990; Nydell, 1987; O'Brien & Plooij, 1976; Black & Mendenhall, 1990). One problem is that in the limited context of a managerial training program, individuals are often merely relegated to memorizing lists of " do's" and " don'ts" (prescribed and proscribed behaviors) associated with the target culture.

Managers may thus be counselled that in culture " X," one should never show the soles of one's shoes to another person, because such an act has clearly offensive meanings for members of that culture; or that in culture " Y," the color pink symbolizes death, thus they should scrupulously avoid giving flowers or gifts of this color; and so on. This approach ultimately offers little room for comparison or generalization across cultures.