

Barriers to intercultural communication assignment

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We live in a culturally diverse world. People will encounter individuals from different races, religions, and nationalities in their day to day encounters. There is often anxiety surrounding unfamiliar cultures [pic] . What manners are acceptable? What will offend a person from a very different background? It can be paralyzing to deal with other people if we do not know what to expect. The following suggestions discussed in the manual, *Becoming a Master Student*, by Dave Ellis are applicable to people in a variety of settings. When dealing with diverse people look for similarities.

Our goals, dreams, and aspirations may be more alike than our skin color. Parenting approaches may differ, but the common bond of a mother and a child crosses many barriers. Most people have basic needs in common, like Maslow's hierarchy of needs that suggest all people have physiological, safety, acceptance, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs. Considering these things it is easy to see our essential common ground. And this is where we can begin our comprehension of others. Effective communication with people of different cultures is especially challenging.

Cultures provide people with ways of thinking-ways of seeing, hearing, and interpreting the world. Thus the same words can mean different things to people from different cultures, even when they talk the " same" language. When the languages are different, and translation has to be used to communicate, the potential for misunderstandings increases. Stella Ting-Toomey describes three ways in which culture interferes with effective cross-cultural understanding. First is what she calls " cognitive constraints. " These are the frames of reference or world views that provide a backdrop that all new information is compared to or inserted into.

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Second are “ behavior constraints. ” Each culture has its own rules about proper behavior which affect verbal and nonverbal communication. Whether one looks the other person in the eye-or not; whether one says what one means overtly or talks around the issue; how close the people stand to each other when they are talking—all of these and many more are rules of politeness which differ from culture to culture. Ting-Toomey’s third factor is “ emotional constraints. ” Different cultures regulate the display of emotion differently. Some cultures get very emotional when they are debating an issue.

They yell, they cry, they exhibit their anger, fear, frustration, and other feelings openly. Other cultures try to keep their emotions hidden, exhibiting or sharing only the “ rational” or factual aspects of the situation. All of these differences tend to lead to communication problems. If the people involved are not aware of the potential for such problems, they are even more likely to fall victim to them, although it takes more than awareness to overcome these problems and communicate effectively across cultures. Culture is the core concept in diversity.

Culture is defined as learned patterns of perceptions, values and behaviors shared by a group of people that is also dynamic and heterogeneous. Culture also involves our emotions and feelings. Cultural groups share perceptions??? ways of looking at the world. Culture is the lens through which we view the world. All the information we receive passes through this perceptual lens. We select, evaluate and organize information from the external environment through perception. Culture influences communication.

All cultural groups influence the ways in which their members experience and perceive the world.

Members of a culture create a world view, which in turn influences communication. In the intercultural communication context, there are barriers, including the following: Ethnocentrism ??? the belief that one's own cultural group, usually equated with nationality, is superior to all other cultural groups. Ethnocentrism becomes a barrier when one believes that another culture's values are not equally good or worthy, which prevents trying to see another's point of view. Stereotyping ??? widely held beliefs about a group of people and are a form of generalization, a way of categorizing and processing information we receive.

Stereotypes become a barrier when negative thoughts about a group of people are held rigidly and acted upon. Prejudice ??? a negative attitude toward a cultural group based on little or no experience. Stereotypes tell us what a group is like, prejudice tells us how to feel about that group. Color-blind approach ??? not to notice race/color. This approach discourages any meaningful conversations about race relations and allows people to ignore, deny, disregard and continue to support the status quo ??? the existence of racial inequalities.

It allows blame to be placed on the minority group. Discrimination ??? the behavior that results from stereotyping or prejudice ??? overt action to exclude, avoid, or distance oneself from other groups. Discrimination may be based on racism or any of the other "isms", sexism, ageism, and elitism, related to belonging to a cultural group. Discrimination belongs to a more

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powerful group that holds prejudices toward another less powerful group resulting in actions toward members of that group that are discriminatory.

Tips on Breaking Cultural Barriers

Become more conscious of the identity groups to which you belong. Identify how the group values influenced the way you perceive other cultural groups. ??? Become more aware of your own communication in intercultural encounters. Think about the message you are sending, verbally and nonverbally. Think about your tone of voice, your posture, your gestures and your eye contact to determine if you are sending the messages you want to send. ??? Think about why you have or don't have diverse friends and what you can learn from seeing the world through their lenses. Become more knowledgeable about different cultures by reading local ethnic newspapers and seeing foreign films. ??? Notice how different cultural groups are portrayed in the media to see if minority groups are represented and how. ??? Recognize negative stereotypes, and obtain information that will counteract the stereotype and work consciously to reject them. ??? When speaking about other groups, use tentative words that don't reflect generalizations, like generally, " many times", " it seems to me", or " in my experience. ??? Practice speaking up when someone tells a joke that is harmful toward another group. Each of us is exposed to people from other cultures on a regular basis, in the workplace, in our social activities, at school, or even within our families. Our culture hinders us from getting our message across as well receiving the full message that others want to convey to us. This article expound on three aspects: what culture is, the main causes for cross-cultural misunderstandings, and the attitudes and skills that we need to communicate cross-culturally.

When we think about culture we first think about a country, and particularly about its food, art, customs, and patterns of behavior. These are the outward manifestations of a system of values, assumptions, and deeply rooted beliefs. Culture emerges as a group of people face and then react to the challenges of life. The responses to those challenges that are successful are taught and shared among members of the group and are passed on from the older to the younger members. Culture is then learned through experience.

You can think of culture as having three levels:

- o The top level is the outward manifestations, the artifacts: visible behavior, art, clothing and so on.
- o In the middle level are the values. These are invisible rules that cause the artifacts
- o The most powerful dimension of culture is the implicit cultural assumptions. These assumptions lie so deep that they are never questioned, stated or defended

Culture also exists among Americans, but what are the implicit cultural assumptions of Americans?

Some of the most distinctive characteristics of the American culture are: individualism, equality, competition, personal control of the environment, self-help concept, action orientation, informality, directness, practicality, materialism, and problem-solving orientation. These American values and deeply rooted beliefs are very different from other country's values and beliefs. The implicit cultural assumptions of Americans are often opposed to those of other cultures. When individuals from different cultures run into each other's values and beliefs, cross-cultural misunderstandings take place.

People constantly interact with people who have similar views and who reinforce their beliefs. To be able to distinguish between the in-group and

the out-group is of central importance for individuals because it allows them to find an identity as to who they are and who they are not. In the book entitled *Cross Cultural Encounters*, Brislim states: " If individuals have out-groups whom they can blame for troubles, the in-group is then solidified since there is a common goal around which to rally. " Later on he says: " Individuals become accustomed to reacting in terms of in-group and out-groups.

They continue to use such distinctions when interacting with people from other cultures whom they do not know. " This in-group/out-group distinction provides us with the basis for ethnocentrism, which is the tendency to interpret and to judge all other groups, their environment, and their communication according to the categories and values of our own culture. We are guilty of ethnocentrism when we hold that our view of the world is the right one, the correct one, and the only one. We are all familiar with stereotyping, which is one of the most serious problems in intercultural communication.

Our tendency to hold beliefs about groups of individuals based on previously formed opinions, perceptions, and attitudes is often a defense mechanism, a way of reducing anxiety. There are many other causes of cross-cultural misunderstanding: lack of trust, lack of empathy, and the misuse of power. All of us know what they are about and the turmoil that they cause. But, how can we do a better job at communicating among cultures? The same skills that we need to communicate in general apply to cross-cultural communication.

Lets look at some of those skills: Know yourself: Identify your attitudes, your opinions, and the biases that we all carry around. Identify your likes, your dislikes, your prejudices, and your degree of personal ethnocentrism. Take time: Listen to the other person and allow him or her to accomplish their purpose. Don't jump to conclusions. Some times we finish the thoughts and ideas of the other person before he or she has finished talking. Some cultures non-verbal styles call for periods of silence and long pauses.

Encourage feedback: Feedback allows communicators to correct and adjust messages. Without feedback we cannot have agreement. First we must create an atmosphere where others are encouraged to give us feedback. Again, don't be afraid of silence. It could be the appropriate feedback at times. Develop empathy: The grater the difference between us and others, the harder it is to empathize. To develop empathy we must put ourselves in the other person's place. By becoming more sensitive to the needs, values, and goals of the other person, we overcome our ethnocentric tendencies.

Seek the commonalities among diverse cultures: Despite our cultural differences we are all alike in many ways. We need to seek that common ground to establish a bond between ourselves and the rest of humanity. Although our own ethnocentrism might have hindered us from getting to know people from other cultures, let us be more than ever committed to help ourselves and others overcome the barrier that culture creates. Let us endeavor to minimize the occurrences of cross-cultural misunderstandings as we develop the attitudes and the skills that are needed to communicate cross-culturally.

A better approach is to examine on a general level the barriers to intercultural communication. LaRay M. Barna (1997) has developed a list of six such barriers: anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations, and language. His categories of barriers will be used when discussing problems that can arise in intercultural encounters. The first three are discussed in this chapter. Stereotypes and prejudice are discussed separately in Chapter 5. Nonverbal misinterpretations and language are discussed separately in later chapters.

Taking these common mistakes into account can help you improve your intercultural communication skills. ANXIETY The first barrier is high anxiety. When you are anxious because of not knowing what you are expected to do, it is only natural to focus on that feeling and not be totally present in the communication transaction. For example, you may have experienced anxiety on your very first day on a new college campus or in a new job. You may be so conscious of being new??? and out of place??? and focus so much of your attention on that feeling that you make common mistakes and appear awkward to others. 4 Chapter 4 04-Jandt_Text. qxd 6/21/03 5: 54 PM Page 74 Sugawara (1993) surveyed 168 Japanese employees of Japanese companies working in the United States and 135 of their U. S. coworkers. Only 8% of the U. S. coworkers felt impatient with the Japanese coworkers' English. While 19% of the Japanese employees felt their spoken English was poor or very poor and 20% reported feeling nervous when speaking English with U. S. coworkers, 30% of the Japanese employees felt the U. S. coworkers were impatient with their accent, and almost 60% believed that language was the

problem in communicating with the U. S. coworkers. For some, anxiety over speaking English properly contributed to avoiding interactions with the U. S. coworkers and limiting interactions both on and off the job to other Japanese only. ASSUMING SIMILARITY INSTEAD OF DIFFERENCE The second barrier is assuming similarity instead of difference. In 1997, a Danish woman left her 14-month-old baby girl in a stroller outside a Manhattan restaurant while she was inside. Other diners at the restaurant became concerned and called New York City Police.

The woman was charged with endangering a child and was jailed for two nights. Her child was placed in foster care. The woman and the Danish consulate explained that leaving children unattended outside cafes is common in Denmark. Pictures were wired to the police showing numerous strollers parked outside cafes while parents were eating inside. The Danish woman had assumed that Copenhagen is similar to New York, that what is commonly done in Copenhagen is also commonly done in New York. When you assume similarity between cultures you can be caught unaware of important differences.

When you have no information about a new culture, it might make sense to assume there are no differences, to behave as you would in your home culture. But each culture is different and unique to some degree. Boucher (1974), for example, has shown how cultures differ as to whom it is appropriate to display emotions. If you assume that display of emotions is similar to your culture, you might see people in some circumstances as

lacking emotion and others in other circumstances as displaying emotions inappropriately. The inverse can be a barrier as well.

Assuming difference instead of similarity can lead to your not recognizing important things that cultures share in common. It's better to assume nothing. It's better to ask, " What are the customs? " rather than assuming they're the same??? or different??? everywhere. Barriers to Intercultural Communication 75 04-Jandt_Text. qxd 6/21/03 5: 54 PM Page 75

ETHNOCENTRISM Definition The third barrier to effective intercultural communication is ethnocentrism, or negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture.

To be ethnocentric is to believe in the superiority of one's own culture. Everything in a culture is consistent to that culture and makes sense if you understand that culture. For example, assume that global warming is a fact and, as a result, assume that summers in the United States average 43?? C (109?? F). It would be logical to make adjustments: Rather than air condition buildings all day, you might close schools and businesses in the afternoons to conserve energy. Such adjustments would make sense.

Why then do some people attribute sensible midday siestas in hot climates to laziness? Another name for ethnocentrism is the anthropological concept of cultural relativism. It does not mean that everything is equal. It does mean that we must try to understand other people's behavior in the context of their culture before we judge it. It also means that we recognize the arbitrary nature of our own cultural behaviors and be willing to reexamine them by learning about behaviors in other cultures (Cohen, 1998).

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A less extreme form of ethnocentrism can be labeled cultural nearsightedness, or taking one's own culture for granted and neglecting other cultures. For example, people in the United States often use the word Americans to refer to U. S. citizens, but actually that word is the correct designation of all people in North and South America. Its careless use is a form of ethnocentrism. Cultural nearsightedness often results in making assumptions that simple things are the same everywhere.

Designing forms for something as simple as a person's name is not that simple if you recognize how widely practices vary. For example, in Mexico people may have two surnames, with the first from the father's first surname and the second from the mother's surname. Often, only the first surname is used and the second abbreviated. When a woman marries, she usually retains both of her surnames and adds her husband's first surname. Or consider China with 1.3 billion people and only "... the single greatest barrier to business success is the one erected by culture." Edward T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall