

CHAPTER 2

Culture and Intercultural Communication

- ▶ Culture
 - Defining Culture for the Study of Communication
 - Culture and Related Terms
- ▶ Why Cultures Differ
 - Forces that Maintain Cultural Differences
 - The Interrelatedness of Cultural Forces
- ▶ Intercultural Communication
 - Examples of Intercultural Interactions
 - Similarities and Differences between Communicators
 - Definition of Intercultural Communication
 - Intercultural Communication and Related Terms
- ▶ Summary

This book is about interpersonal communication between people from different cultures. Our goal is to explain how you can achieve interpersonal competence in interactions that involve intercultural communication. This chapter provides a general understanding of culture and intercultural communication. It also includes a discussion about why one culture differs from another. Chapter 3 will continue the discussion by exploring the nature of intercultural communication competence.

▶ ▶ ▶ Culture

Definitions of *culture* are numerous. In 1952, Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn published a book with over 200 pages devoted to different definitions of the term.¹ Since then, many other scholars have offered additional definitions and approaches.

Our concern in this book is with the link between culture and communication. Consequently, our definition of *culture* is one that allows us to investigate how culture contributes to human symbolic processes.

Defining Culture for the Study of Communication

Our goal in presenting a particular definition of *culture* is to explain the important link between culture and communication. However, we emphasize that the way we define culture is not the "right" or "best" way. Rather, it is a definition that is useful for our purpose of helping you to understand the crucial link between culture and communication as you set out to improve your intercultural competence.

Culture is a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people.

Culture Is Learned Humans are not born with the genetic imprint of a particular culture. Instead, people learn about their culture through interactions with parents, other family members, friends, and even strangers who are part of the culture. Later in this chapter we explain why some cultures are so different from others. For now, we want to describe the general process by which people learn their culture.

Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialized. Watching how adults react and talk to new babies is an excellent way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture among people. Two babies born at exactly the same time in two parts of the globe may be taught to respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways. For example, some babies are taught to smile at strangers, whereas others are taught to smile only in very specific circumstances. In the United States, most children are asked from a very early age to make decisions about what they want to do and what they prefer; in many other cultures, a parent would never ask a child what she or he wants to do but would simply tell the child what to do.

Culture is also taught by the explanations people receive for the natural and human events around them. Parents tell children that a certain person is a good boy because _____. People from different cultures would complete the blank in contrasting ways. The people with whom the children interact will praise and encourage particular kinds of behaviors (such as crying or not crying, being quiet or being talkative). Certainly there are variations in what a child is taught from family to family in any given culture. However, our interest is not in these variations but in the similarities across most or all families that form the basis of a culture. Because our specific interest is in the relationship between culture and interpersonal communication, we focus on how cultures provide their members with a set of interpretations that they then use as filters to make sense of messages and experiences.

Culture Is a Set of Shared Interpretations Shared interpretations establish the very important link between communication and culture. Cultures exist in the minds of people, not in external or tangible objects or behaviors. Integral to our discussion of communication is an emphasis on symbols as the means by which all communication takes place. The meanings of symbols exist in the minds of the individual communicators; when those symbolic ideas are shared with others, they form the basis for culture. Not all of an individual's symbolic ideas are necessarily shared with other people, and some symbols will be shared only with a few. A culture can form only if symbolic ideas are shared with a relatively large group of people.

CULTURE *connections*

Culture's Core

I recall now, so very clearly,
as evening clings like tapestry,
a distant time when I was small
and loved to creep along the wall
toward the circle cast by light
where elders talked, among themselves, into the night.

They filled the room with stirring tales, as I—
in my pajamas with the little feet—would lie
behind the outsized chair, hair pressed to rug,
listening invisibly, 'til wakened by the hug
of arms that cradled me 'round knee and head
and placed me back in sagging bed.

They told their stories,
one by one, of hardships suffered, and of glories—
times endured, evils feared,
stunning triumphs engineered
by luck, effort, patience, cunning,
and those who saved themselves by running.

I remember, too, the sagas told
about the turning points in growing old
amidst the tempests once withstood,
and tender details of first kisses, which were good
for waves of jokes and laughter
that I scarcely understood 'til after
I had aged, and learned of love affairs,
and private things that people do in pairs.

So now, like sages who have been and done,
who've told their tales of favors lost and won,
I primp my heirs with stories from my youth
of the vainglorious pursuits of truth,
justice, and the 'Merican way,
'til a still small voice can guide, I pray,
the journey forth where only they may go,
toward a promised land, which I will never know.

Thus repeats the simple lore
of passion, pleasure, pain, and pride
that marks us all, deep down inside,
as humans with a common core.

—Myron W. Lustig



► The beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of our culture are learned. Families are often a major setting in which these cultural patterns are acquired.

Culture Involves Beliefs, Values, Norms, and Social Practices The shared symbol systems that form the basis of culture represent ideas about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices. Because of their importance in understanding the ways in which cultures vary and their role in improving intercultural communication competence, the first section of Chapter 4 is devoted to their detailed explanation. For now, it is enough to know that *beliefs* refer to the basic understanding of a group of people about what the world is like or what is true or false. *Values* refer to what a group of people defines as good and bad or what it regards as important. *Norms* refer to rules for appropriate behavior, which provide the expectations people have of one another and of themselves. *Social practices* are the predictable behavior patterns that members of a culture typically follow.

TRY THIS

Describe one belief, one value, and one norm that you hold that is also held by the "typical" member of your culture. Describe how each of these affects your social practices with parents or other elders.

Culture Affects Behavior If culture were located solely in the minds of people, we could only speculate about what a culture is, since it is impossible for one person to see into the mind of another. However, these shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms affect the *behaviors* of large groups of people. In other words, the social practices that characterize a culture give people guidelines about what things mean, what is important, and

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Intercultural Competence

Interpersonal Communication across Cultures

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CULTURE *connections*

I'm a member of the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, and although I've lived in the United States most of my adult life, my consciousness remains fixed on the time and place of my upbringing. On the surface, I'm as American as everyone else. My husband, who was also raised in Nigeria, and I are both professionals. We live in the suburbs and go to PTA meetings. In my private life, my Iboness—the customs that rigidly dictate how the men and women of my tribe live their lives—continues to influence the choices I make. I see these American and Ibo aspects of my life as distinct; I separate them perfectly, and there are no blurrings. Except for maybe one: Delia.

When I left Nigeria at 18, I had no doubts about who and what I was. I was a woman. I was *only* a woman.

All my life my mother told me that a woman takes as much in life as she's given; if she's educated, it's only so that she can better cater to her husband and children. When I was Delia's age, I knew with absolute certainty that I would marry the Ibo man my family approved for me and bear his children. I understood that receiving a good education and being comfortable in both the Western and the traditional worlds would raise the bride price my prospective husband would pay my family. My role was to be a great asset to my husband, no matter what business he was engaged in.

I understood all of that clearly; I was, after all, raised within the context of child brides, polygamy, clitorectomies and arranged marriages. But then I married and had my own daughter, and all my certainty, all my resolve to maintain my Ibo beliefs, collapsed in a big heap at my feet.

First, my daughter's ties to Ibo womanhood are only as strong as the link—meaning me. Therein lies the problem. I haven't been half the teacher to my daughter that my mother was to me.

I've struggled daily with how best to raise my daughter. Every decision involving Delia is a tug of war between Ibo and American traditions. I've vacillated between trying to turn her into the kind of woman her grandmothers would be proud of and letting her be the modern, independent woman she wants to be. Each time Delia scores an academic or athletic victory, I start to applaud her, but my cheers get stuck in my throat as I hear both her grandmothers' voices warning, "She's only a woman." I know in my heart that her achievements will not matter to her relatives; they will judge her by the kind of man she marries, and the children—preferably male—that she bears.

At 18, Delia knows very little about the rules that govern the lives of Ibo women. She knows just enough about housekeeping to survive. She will most likely not consider my feelings in choosing her spouse. She is not the selflessly loyal daughter that I was to my mother.

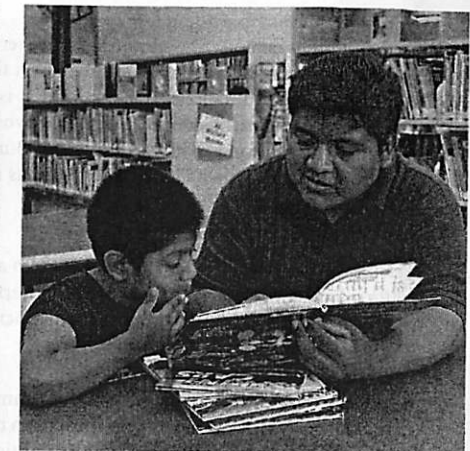
I wonder about the implications for people like me, women from traditional cultures raising American-born daughters. Should we limit their opportunities to keep them loyal to our beliefs and our pasts, or should we encourage our daughters to avail themselves of all experiences, even at the risk of rejecting who and what we are?

Maybe what I feel is what parents all over the world feel: that I could have done a better job of instilling my beliefs in my child. Now, it's too late.

Or perhaps I've always known that Delia is her own person with her own life to lead.

Delia called the other night from Princeton. She's coming home soon, and I'm infected by her excitement. But I wonder: will I know the young woman who steps off the plane?

—Dympna Ugwu-Oju



► By teaching and explaining to their children, parents help them develop a common set of meanings and expectations.

what should or should not be done. Thus, culture establishes predictability in human interactions. Cultural differences are evident in the varying ways in which people conduct their everyday activities, as people “perform” their culture in their behavioral routines.

Within a given geographical area, people who interact with one another will, over time, form social bonds that help to stabilize their interactions and patterns of behavior. These social practices become the basis for making predictions and forming expectations about others. However, no one is entirely “typical” of the culture to which she or he belongs; each person differs, in unique ways, from the general cultural tendency to think and to behave in a particular way. Nor is “culture” the complete explanation for why people behave as they do: differences in age, gender, social status, and many other factors also affect the likelihood that people will enact specific behaviors. Thus, “culture” is an important, but not the only, explanation for people's conduct.

Culture Involves Large Groups of People We differentiate between smaller groups of individuals, who may engage in interpersonal communication, and larger groups of people more traditionally associated with cultures. For example, if you work every day with the same group of people and you regularly see and talk to them, you will undoubtedly begin to develop shared perceptions and experiences that will affect the way you communicate. Although some people might want to use the term *culture* to refer to the bonds that develop among the people in a small group, we prefer to distinguish between the broad-based, culturally shared beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which people bring to their interactions and the unique expectations and experiences that arise as a result of particular interpersonal relationships that develop. Consequently, we will restrict the use of the term *culture* to much larger, societal levels of organization.

Culture is also often used to refer to other types of large groups of people. Mary Jane Collier and Milt Thomas, for example, assert that the term “can refer to ethnicity, gender, profession, or any other symbol system that is bounded and salient to individuals.”² Our definition does not exclude groups such as women, the deaf, gays and lesbians, and others identified by Collier and Thomas. However, our emphasis is primarily on culture in its more traditional forms, which Collier and Thomas refer to as *ethnicity*.

Culture and Related Terms

Terms such as *nation*, *race*, and *ethnic group* are often used synonymously with the term *culture*. *Subculture* and *co-culture* are other terms that are sometimes used in talking about groups of people. There are important distinctions, however, between these terms and the groups of people to which they might refer.

Nation In everyday language, people commonly treat *culture* and *nation* as equivalent terms. They are not. *Nation* is a political term referring to a government and a set of formal and legal mechanisms that regulate the political behavior of its people. These regulations often encompass such aspects of a people as how leaders are chosen, by what rules the leaders must govern, the laws of banking and currency, the means to establish military groups, and the rules by which a legal system is conducted. Foreign policies, for instance, are determined by a nation and not by a culture. The culture, or cultures, that exist within the boundaries of a nation-state certainly influence the regulations that a nation develops, but the term *culture* is not synonymous with *nation*. Although one cultural group predominates in some nations, most nations contain multiple cultures within their boundaries.

The United States is an excellent example of a nation that has several major cultural groups living within its geographical boundaries; European Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and various Asian American cultures are all represented in the United States. All the members of these different cultural groups are citizens of the nation of the United States.

CULTURE connections

Why do you talk like that? Where are you from? Is that string in your hair? Newness is easy to detect, especially with immigrants. Everything about you is a dead giveaway. And people constantly watch and stare through the scrutinizing lens of curiosity. That was a foreign thing for me, being questioned, being eyed. From top to bottom, the eyes would travel. From top to bottom, taking a silent inventory of the perceived differences: the way I wore my hair wrapped with thread as thick as an undiluted accent, or in small braids intricately woven like a basket atop my head; my clothing, a swirl of bright, festive colors dyed on fabric much too thin for the shivery East Coast climate.

—Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

Even the nation of Japan, often regarded as so homogeneous that the word *Japanese* is commonly used to refer both to the nation and to the culture, is actually multicultural. Though the Yamato Japanese culture overwhelmingly predominates within the nation of Japan, there are other cultures living there. These groups include the Ainu, an indigenous group with their own culture, religion, and language; other cultures that have lived in Japan for many generations and originate mainly from Okinawa, Korea, and China; and more recent immigrants also living there.³

Race *Race* commonly refers to certain physical similarities, such as skin color or eye shape, that are shared by a group of people and are used to mark or separate them from others. Contrary to popular notions, however, race is not primarily a biological term; it is a political and societal one that was invented to justify economic and social distinctions. In the United States, for example, various non-Anglo-Saxon and non-Nordic cultural groups that would now be regarded as predominantly “white”—European Jews and people from such places as Ireland, Italy, Poland, and other eastern and southern European locales—were initially derided as being racial “mongrels” and therefore nonwhite.⁴ Conversely, Latinos who were classified as “white” through the 1960 census are now regarded by the United States as “not-quite whites, as in Hispanic whites.”⁵ Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau has changed the racial classification of various Asian American groups from white to Asian. Thus, one’s “race” is best understood as a social and legal construction.⁶

Although racial categories are inexact as a classification system, it is generally agreed that *race* is a more all-encompassing term than either *culture* or *nation*. Not all Caucasian people, for example, are part of the same culture or nation. Many western European countries principally include people from the Caucasian race. Similarly, among Caucasian people there are definite differences in culture. Consider the cultural differences among the primarily Caucasian countries of Great Britain, Norway, and Germany to understand the distinction between culture and race.

CULTURE connections

It could be, perhaps, because I am neither engineer nor musician. Because I’m neither gringa nor Latina. Because I’m not any one thing. The reality is I am a mongrel. I live on bridges; I’ve earned my place on them, stand comfortably when I’m on one, content with betwixt and between.

I’ve spent a lifetime contemplating my mother and father, studying their differences. I count both their cultures as my own. But I’m happy to be who I am, strung between identities, shuttling from one to another, switching from brain to brain. I am the product of people who launched from one land to another, who slipped into other skins, lived by other rules—yet never put their cultures behind them.

—Marie Arana

Sometimes race and culture do seem to work hand in hand to create visible and important distinctions among groups within a larger society; and sometimes race plays a part in establishing separate cultural groups. An excellent example of the interplay of culture and race is in the history of African American people in the United States. Although race may have been used initially to set African Americans apart from Caucasian U.S. Americans, African American culture provides a strong and unique source of identity to members of the black race in the United States. Scholars now acknowledge that African American culture, with its roots in traditional African cultures, is separate and unique and has developed its own set of cultural patterns. Although a person from Nigeria and an African American are both from the same race, they are from distinct cultures. Similarly, not all black U.S. Americans are part of the African American culture, since many have a primary cultural identification with cultures in the Caribbean, South America, or Africa.

Race can, however, form the basis for prejudicial communication that can be a major obstacle to intercultural communication. Categorization of people by race in the United States, for example, has been the basis of systematic discrimination and oppression of people of color. We will explore the impact of racism more fully in Chapter 6.

Ethnicity *Ethnic group* is another term often used interchangeably with culture. *Ethnicity* is actually a term that is used to refer to a wide variety of groups who might share a language, historical origins, religion, nation-state, or cultural system. The nature of the relationship of a group's ethnicity to its culture will vary greatly depending on a number of other important characteristics. For example, many people in the United States still maintain an allegiance to the ethnic group of their ancestors who emigrated from other nations and cultures. It is quite common for people to say they are German or Greek or Armenian when the ethnicity indicated by the label refers to ancestry and perhaps some customs and

CULTURE *connections*

As a woman with some Cherokee ancestors on my father's side and a blonde, blue-eyed daughter, I find it impossible to pin down the meaning of ethnicity. It's an especially delicate business here in the Southwest, where so many of us boil in one pot without much melting. We're never allowed to forget we are foreign bodies in the eyes of our neighbors. The annual Winter Holiday Concert at Camille's school features a bright patchwork of languages and rituals, each of which must be learned by a different subset of kids, the others having known it since they could talk. It sounds idyllic, but then spend half an hour on the playground and you're also likely to come away with a whole new vocabulary of racial slurs. On the playground no one's counting the strengths of your character, nor the woman your great-grandfather married, unless her genes have dyed your hair and fixed your features. It's the face on your passport that gets you in. Faces that set us apart, in separate houses.

—Barbara Kingsolver

practices that originated with the named ethnic group. Realistically, many of these individuals now are typical members of the European American culture. In other cases, the identification of ethnicity may coincide more completely with culture. In the former Yugoslavia, for example, there are at least three major ethnic groups—Slovenians, Croats, and Serbians—each with its own language and distinct culture, who were forced into one nation-state following World War II. It is also possible for members of an ethnic group to be part of many different cultures and/or nations. For instance, Jewish people share a common ethnic identification, even though they belong to widely varying cultures and are citizens of many different nations.

Subculture and Co-culture *Subculture* is also a term sometimes used to refer to racial and ethnic minority groups that share both a common nation-state with other cultures and some aspects of the larger culture. Often, for example, African Americans, Arab Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and other groups are referred to as *subcultures* within the United States. The term, however, has connotations that we find problematic, because it suggests subordination to the larger European American culture. Similarly, the term *co-culture* is occasionally employed in an effort to avoid the implication of a hierarchical relationship between the European American culture and these other important cultural groups that form the mosaic of the United States. This term, too, is problematic for us. *Co-culture* suggests, for instance, that there is a single overarching culture in the United States, implicitly giving undue prominence to the European American cultural group. In our shrinking and interdependent world, most cultures must coexist alongside other cultures. We prefer to regard African Americans, Arab Americans, Chinese Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and similar groups of people as cultures in their own right. When used to refer to cultural groups within a nation, therefore, the term *co-culture* strikes us as redundant. When used to refer to one's identity as a member of various groups based on occupation, hobbies, interests, and the like, *co-culture* seems less precise to us than such alternative terms as *lifestyle* or *social group*. Chapter 6 elaborates on this distinction between one's cultural and social identities.

►►► Why Cultures Differ

Cultures look, think, and communicate as they do because of the need to accommodate and adapt to the pressures and forces that influence the culture as a whole. Members of a culture seldom notice these forces because they usually exert a steady and continuous effect on everyone. Few people pay attention to the subtleties of commonplace events and circumstances. Instead, they remain oblivious to the powerful forces that create and maintain cultural differences. This tendency has led Gustav Ichheiser to declare that "nothing evades our attention as persistently as that which is taken for granted."⁷

In this section, we ask you to explore with us the taken-for-granted forces that create and maintain cultural differences. Our goal is to explain *why* one culture differs from another. As you read, consider your own culture and compare it to one that is very different or foreign to you. Why are they different? Why aren't all cultures alike? Why do cultures develop certain characteristics? Why do cultures communicate as they do? Why are they changing?

Forces That Maintain Cultural Differences

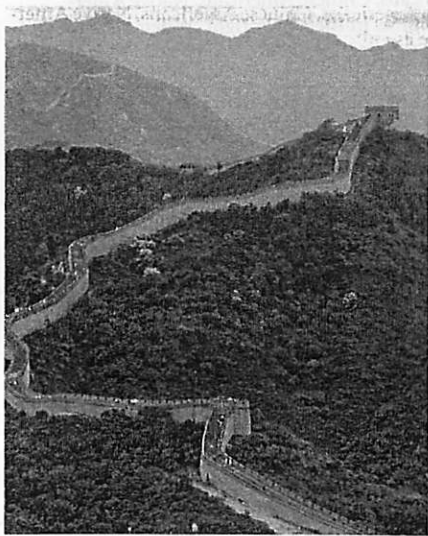
Cultural differences are created and sustained by a complex set of the forces that are deeply embedded within the culture's members. We have selected six forces that help to generate cultural differences, including a culture's history, ecology, technology, biology, institutional networks, and interpersonal communication patterns. Of course, this list is by no means exhaustive. Consider these forces as representing factors with the potential to influence the ways in which cultures develop and maintain their differences yet change over time.

History The unique experiences that have become part of a culture's collective wisdom constitute its *history*. Wars, inheritance rules, religious practices, economic consequences, prior events, legislative acts, and the allocation of power to specific individuals are all historical developments that contribute to cultural differences.

As one of literally thousands of possible examples of the effects of historical forces on the development and maintenance of a culture, let us briefly consider a set of events that occurred in Europe during the late fourteenth century. The experience of bubonic plague, commonly known as the Black Death, was widely shared throughout most of Europe as well as in portions of Africa and Asia. It affected subsequent beliefs and behaviors for many generations.

In 1347, a trading ship traveling to Europe from the Black Sea carried an inadvertent cargo—a horrible disease known as the Black Death. It was spread rapidly by infected fleas carried by rats, and within two years it had traveled from the southern tip of Italy across the entire European continent, killing between one-third and one-half of the European population. There were recurring outbreaks about every decade until the early eighteenth century. Unlike famine, the Black Death attacked every level and social class. When the initial wave of the epidemic was over, the survivors began a reckless spending spree, fueled in large measure by the newly acquired wealth left by the dead and by a sense of anarchy. The diminished availability of workers meant that labor, now a scarce commodity, was in demand. Workers throughout Europe organized to bargain for economic and political parity, and revolts against religious and political institutions were commonplace over the next several centuries. Often, however, workers' demands for retribution were either unrealistic or unrelated to the actual causes of the unrest, and the targets of the revolts were frequently foreigners or other helpless victims who were used as scapegoats for political purposes.

Although the Black Death was not the only historical force behind European cultural change, and indeed is insufficient by itself as an explanation for



► The Great Wall of China symbolizes the importance and centrality of historical events on modern Chinese cultures.

the changes in modern Europe, it was certainly a crucial experience that was recounted across the generations and influenced the development of European cultures. For instance, although the Black Death can now be controlled with modern-day antibiotics, a recent outbreak of bubonic plague in India caused mass panic and widespread evacuations to other cities, thus inadvertently spreading the disease to uninfected areas before it was contained. One important consequence of the Black Death was the unchallenged expectation that all population increases were desirable, as new births would replace those who had died and would thereby lead to increased standards of living. This belief predominated for over 400 years, leading people to ignore the evidence that overcrowding in some cities was the cause of disease and famine. In 1798, Thomas Malthus challenged this belief, arguing that human populations might be limited by their available food supply.

CULTURE *connections*

The first time I saw coconut-skating I was so sure it was a joke that I laughed out loud. The scowl that came back was enough to tell me that I had completely misunderstood the situation. In the Philippines a maid tends to be all business, especially when working for Americans.

But there she was, barefooted as usual, with half of a coconut shell under each broad foot, systematically skating around the room. So help me, *skating*.

If this performance wasn't for my amusement or hers (and her face said it wasn't), then she had gone out of her head. It wasn't the first time, nor the last, that my working hypothesis was that a certain local person was at least a part-time lunatic.

I backed out and strolled down the hall, trying to look cool and calm.

"Ismelda . . . Ismelda is skating in the living room," I said to Mary, who didn't even look up from the desk where she was typing.

"Yes, this is Thursday, isn't it." . . .

"She skates only on Thursdays? That's nice," I said as I beat an awkward retreat from Mary's little study room.

"Oh, you mean *why* is she skating—right?" Mary called after me.

"Yes, I guess that's the major question," I replied.

Mary, who had done part of her prefield orientation training in one of my workshops, decided to give me a dose of my own medicine: "Go out there and watch her skate; then come back and tell me what you see." And so I did.

Her typewriter clicked on, scarcely missing a beat, until I exclaimed from the living room hallway, "I've got it!"

"Well, good for you; you're never too old to learn." Mary's voice had just enough sarcasm in it to call me up short on how I must sound to others. And while the typing went on I stood there admiring nature's own polish for hardwood floors, coconut oil, being applied by a very effective Southeast Asian method.

—Ted Ward

Recent examples of the influence of historical events are abundant. In the United States, for instance, consider the economic depression of 1929 and the fear of hyperinflation in 1979; the lessons learned in the “Cold War” with the Soviet Union and in “hot” wars with Germany, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq; bread lines and gas lines; the proliferation of AIDS, cancer, and drugs; and the deaths of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lennon, Ronald Reagan, the astronauts aboard the *Challenger*, and the firefighters at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. All of these events have had profound effects on the ways in which U.S. Americans view themselves and their country. You have undoubtedly heard parents or other elders describe historical events as significantly influencing them and the lives of everyone in their generation. Descriptions of these events are transmitted across generations and form the shared knowledge that guides a culture’s collective actions. As David McCullough says of such events and experiences, “You have to know what people have been through to understand what people want and what they don’t want. That’s the nub of it. And what people have been through is what we call history.”⁸

Ecology The external environment in which the culture lives is the culture’s ecology. It includes such physical forces as the overall climate, the changing weather patterns, the prevailing land and water formations, and the availability or unavailability of certain foods and other raw materials.

There is a considerable amount of evidence to demonstrate that ecological conditions affect a culture’s formation and functioning in many important and often subtle ways. Often, the effects of the culture’s ecology remain hidden to the members of a culture because the climate and environment are a pervasive and constant force. For example, the development and survival of cultures living in cold-weather climates demand an adaptation that often takes the form of an increased need for technology, industry, urbanization, tolerance for ambiguity, and social mobility.⁹ High levels of involvement and closer physical distances in communication characterize cultures that develop in warm climates. High-contact cultures tend to be located in such warm-weather climates as the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, Indonesia, and Latin America, whereas low-contact cultures are found in cooler climates such as Scandinavia, northern Europe, England, portions of North America, and Japan.¹⁰

In the United States, differences in climate are related to variations in self-perceptions and interaction patterns. Compared to residents in the warmer areas of the South, for instance, those living in the colder areas of the northern United States tend to be less verbally dramatic, less socially isolated, less authoritarian in their communication style, more tolerant of ambiguity, more likely to avoid touching others in social situations, and lower in feelings of self-importance or self-worth.¹¹ Surviving a harsh cold-weather climate apparently requires that people act in a more constrained and organized fashion, maintain flexibility to deal with an ambiguous and unpredictable environment, cooperate with others to stave off the wind and the weather, and recognize how puny humans are when compared to such powerful forces as ice storms and snow drifts.

Another important aspect of the ecological environment is the predominant geographical and geological features. For instance, an abundant water supply shapes the economy of a region and certainly influences the day-to-day lifestyles of people. If water is a scarce commodity, a culture must give a major portion of its efforts to locating and providing an



► The climate of a culture, along with other forces of cultural change, produce unique cultural characteristics. Here, a major flood in Davenport, Iowa, required people to make adaptations in order to survive.

item that is essential to human life. Energy expended to maintain a water supply is not available for other forms of accomplishment. Likewise, the shape and contour of the land, along with the strategic location of a culture in relation to other people and places, can alter the mobility, outlook, and frequency of contact with others. Natural resources such as coal, tin, wood, ivory, silver, gold, spices, precious stones, agricultural products, and domesticated animals all contribute to the ecological forces that help to create differences among cultures.

Technology The inventions that a culture has created or borrowed are the culture’s *technology*, which includes such items as tools, weapons, hydraulic techniques, navigational aids, paper clips, barbed wire, stirrups, and microchips. Changes in the available technology can radically alter the balance of forces that maintain a culture. For instance, the invention of barbed wire allowed the U.S. American West to be fenced in, causing range wars and, ultimately, the end of free-roaming herds of cattle.¹² Similarly, stirrups permitted the Mongols to sweep across Asia, because they allowed riders to control their horses while fighting with their hands.

You have undoubtedly experienced the relationship of technology to culture. Can you remember when most U.S. American homes did not have a microwave oven? Two

TRY THIS

How have telephones changed the way people communicate? If you are a frequent phone user, do not use the phone for one week and keep track of the adaptations and compensations you make. (You can substitute e-mail use or similar technologies if you use them frequently.)

generations before microwave ovens became common, most homes also did not have refrigerators and freezers, relying instead on daily trips to the butcher and the baker, and on regular visits from the milkman and the iceman to keep foods from spoiling. Think about how a family's food preparation has changed in the United States. Grocery stores now stock very different food products because of the prevalence of refrigerators and microwave ovens; entirely new industries have developed as well (as shown by the many freezer-to-microwave dishes).

An example of a technological change with even greater consequences is the microchip, which has led to the creation of computers, video games, handheld calculators, and "smart" machines that are capable of adapting to changing circumstances. The corresponding revolution in the storage, processing, production, and transmission of printed words (such as this textbook) because of the computer has led to a society in which there is an abundance of information.

The Internet alone has radically transformed the way in which people are able to interact with each other. Family members who are widely dispersed across the globe are able to maintain contact, thus helping to sustain the culture's beliefs, values, norms, and social practices. A counterpoint to this consequence of the Internet is its availability for introducing new ideas and images into cultures, which may speed up and change the nature of the culture itself.

One special form of technology that has had a major influence on cultures around the world is the media. The media allow human beings to extend sensory capabilities to communicate across time and long distances with duplicate messages. Thus, media are any technologies that extend the ability to communicate beyond the limits of face-to-face encounters. Traditional media, such as books, newspapers, magazines, telegraph, telephone, photography, radio, phonograph, and television, have had a major influence in shaping cultures. The new media technologies, such as satellites, cassettes, videotape, videotext, cable television, videodisk, cellular phones, computers, and the Internet, further extend the capabilities of the traditional media.

Media are responsible for introducing ideas from one culture to another rapidly, in a matter of a few weeks or less. The latest designs from a Paris fashion show can be faxed to Hong Kong manufacturers within minutes of their display in France, and accurate copies of the clothing can be ready for sale in the United States within a very short time.

Especially relevant is the way in which media technologies influence people's perceptions about other cultures. How do *I Love Lucy* reruns, beamed by satellite to Jakarta, influence the way Indonesians try to communicate with someone from the United States?¹³ In what ways do U.S. action-adventure films, in which many of the characters commit acts of violence to resolve interpersonal disagreements, affect the expectations of people from Brazil when they visit the United States? To what extent do media programs accurately reflect a culture and its members? With the ready availability of television programs, music, and movies from multiple cultures, what are the consequences to specific cultures that these different ways of behaving and living have? George A. Barnett and Meihua Lee have suggested:

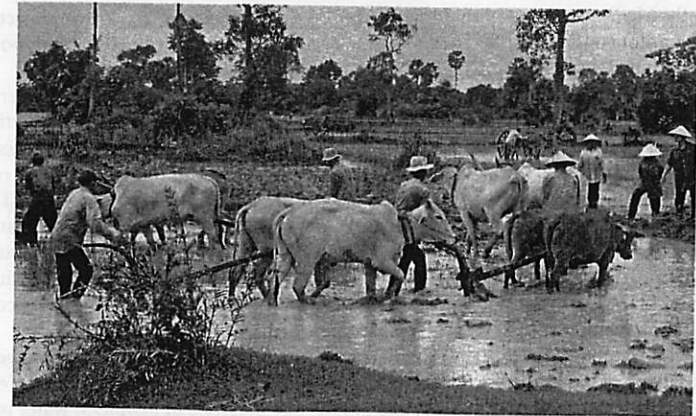
Throughout the world, many cultures depend heavily on imported television programs, primarily from the United States, Western Europe, or Japan. Most are entertainment and sports programs. Since the early 1980's, along with the emergence of a genuinely global commercial media market, the newly developing global media system has been dominated

by three or four dozen large, transnational corporations, with fewer than 10 mostly U.S.-based conglomerates towering over the global market. During the 1990's, the shift to digital transmission of all forms of data has increased at an accelerated pace. This shift has redefined the music industry and will eventually overtake film, radio, and television production and distribution.¹⁴

Thus, media-generated stereotypes have important consequences for the processes and outcomes of intercultural communication.

Biology The inherited characteristics that cultural members share are the result of *biology*, as people with a common ancestry have similar genetic compositions. These hereditary differences often arise as an adaptation to environmental forces, and they are evident in the biological attributes often referred to as *race*. Depending on how finely you wish to make distinctions, there are anywhere from three to hundreds of human races. Biologists are quick to point out, however, that there is far more genetic diversity within each race than there is among races, as humans have had both the means and the motive to mate with others across the entire spectrum of human genetic differences. This makes race an arbitrary but sometimes useful term.¹⁵

Although it is undeniable that genetic variations among humans exist, it is equally clear that biology cannot explain all or even most of the differences among cultures. For example, the evidence from studies that have been conducted in the United States on differences in intelligence suggests that most of the variation in intelligence quotient (IQ) scores is unrelated to cultural differences. Studies of interracial adoption, for instance, reveal that educational and economic advantages, along with the prebirth intrauterine environment, are the critical factors in determining children's IQ scores.¹⁶ The data therefore suggest that although hereditary differences certainly exist, most of the distinctions among



▶ Harnessing the energy of animals has been a major labor-saving technology throughout the world. These Cambodian men use a water buffalo and a plow to till the field.

human groups result from cultural learning or environmental causes rather than from genetic or biological forces. As Michael Winkelman suggests, “biology provides the basis for acquiring capacities, while culture provides those specific skills as related to specific tasks and behaviors.”¹⁷

Readily observable biological differences among groups of people have been amply documented, particularly for external features such as body shape, skin color, and other physical attributes. These visible differences among cultures are often used to define racial boundaries, although they can be affected by climate and other external constraints and are therefore not reliable measures of racial makeup. Better indicants of genetic group distinctions, according to scientists who study their origins and changes, are the inherited single-gene characteristics such as differences in blood types, earwax, and the prevalence of wisdom teeth. Type B blood, for instance, is common among Asian and African races, whereas Rh-negative blood is relatively common among Europeans but rare among other races; Africans and Europeans have soft, sticky ear wax, whereas Japanese and many Native American groups have dry, crumbly earwax; and many Asians lack the third molars, or wisdom teeth, whereas about 15 percent of Europeans and almost all West Africans have them.¹⁸ Of course, racial distinctions such as these are not what is intended by those who differentiate among individuals based on their physical or “racial” characteristics.

A complicating factor in making racial distinctions is that virtually all human populations are of mixed genetic origins. One theory about human biological differences holds that all humans can trace their ancestry back to the genes of a single African woman who lived between 166,000 and 249,000 years ago. An analysis of differences in the mitochondrial DNA of 189 people, 121 of whom were from Africa, was used to estimate the degree



► The technology of the computer, along with the Internet, is dramatically changing how people acquire information about the world. This engineer is running tests for the Space Shuttle program.

CULTURE *connections*

Clarence is quiet this morning. Then again, he's usually that way. Even if he stops by my cabin in town to pay a social call, he'll sometimes sit without speaking, with no sign of discomfort no matter how long the silence continues. It seems to be a stillness born of the land, of a life spent listening, watching, and waiting. I've often tried to imitate this quiet, but that's all it is—an imitation. We sit eating oatmeal and drinking coffee, listening to the stove hiss. Finally he lifts his cup, nods to himself and says, “Too much think . . . That's what makes you nervous.”

For a moment I'm nonplussed, not sure what he's talking about. Then I remember: my questions last night regarding Inupiat culture, philosophy, and the future. Asking about a canyon or a river was one thing; asking if he worried about the changing world was another. Clarence's vast knowledge is anchored in the practical and the immediate—reading snow conditions, building sleds, picking out the best caribou from a herd. Abstract notions are superfluous; no, worse. . . . The Inupiaq language, I remind myself, has no future tense.

—Nick Jans

of relationship among people.¹⁹ Mitochondrial DNA, which is found in every living cell, is passed along substantially unchanged from a mother to her children.

Because there are no “pure” races, membership in a particular racial category is less a matter of biology, genetics, and inherited characteristics than it is a matter of politics, social definitions, and personal preferences.²⁰ Experts have estimated, for instance, that about 25 percent of the genes of African Americans come from white ancestors, and numerous African Americans have Native American ancestry as well. Conversely, up to 5 percent of the genes of European Americans come from black ancestors.²¹

Unfortunately, most studies that claim to associate differences in people's biological race with innate IQ differences do not measure the degree to which genetic heritages come from particular racial stocks.²² Instead, social definitions of race, which assess people's cultural rather than biological identities, are used by researchers to draw conclusions about innate biological differences. Since culture is learned rather than inherited, any obtained differences in these studies are likely the result of lived experiences and intellectual opportunities, rather than of inherited genetic differences.

However, the lack of a biological basis for racial distinctions does not mean that race is unimportant. Rather, race should be understood as a sociological term that refers to people who are believed by themselves or by others to constitute a group of people who share common physical attributes.

Racial differences are often used as the defining features to include some individuals in a particular group while excluding others. Interestingly, U.S. census data, and often social pressures, require individuals to include themselves in only one of the available racial categories, despite ample evidence that many people are of mixed race and have multiple ethnic identities. Thus, a woman whose mother is a black Latina and whose father is a third-generation Korean American is often expected to disavow some parts of her heritage while

identifying with other parts. Difficulties with the census classification system can be seen in the data on the Native American population, which seemingly quadrupled from 1960 to 1990. From 1980 to 1990 alone, the Native American population increased 118 percent in Alabama and 78 percent in New Jersey. As these increases are not related to “natural” causes, such as fertility rates and immigration patterns, demographers have concluded that a newfound pride and an increasing sense of cultural awareness have led many people to so identify themselves on census forms.²³ Indeed, had the film *Dances with Wolves* been released before the census in April 1990, rather than at the end of that year, the number of Native Americans would undoubtedly have been even higher. In the decade since *Dances with Wolves* was released, census data suggest that the Native American population increased by 110 percent.

Institutional Networks *Institutional networks* are the formal organizations in societies that structure activities for large numbers of people. These include government, education, religion, work, professional associations, and even social organizations. With the new media that have recently become available, institutional networks can be created and sustained more readily through the power provided by information technologies.

The importance of government as an organizing force is acknowledged by the emphasis placed in secondary schools on the different types of government systems around the globe. Because their form of government influences how people think about the world, this institutional network plays an important role in shaping culture.



► Buddhists pray together at a temple. The practice of religion provides important institutional networks in most cultures.

The importance of institutional networks is also illustrated by the variability in the ways that people have developed to display spirituality, practice religion, and confront their common mortality. Indeed, religious practices are probably as old as humankind. Even 50,000 years ago, Neanderthal tribes in western Asia buried their dead with food, weapons, and fire charcoal, which were to be used in the next life.

Religion is an important institutional network that binds people to one another and helps to maintain cultural bonds. However, the manner in which various religions organize and connect people differs widely. In countries that practice Christianity or Judaism, people who are deeply involved in the practice of a religion usually belong to a church or synagogue. The congregation is the primary means of affiliation, and religious services are attended at the same place each time. As people become more involved in religious practices, they meet others and join organizations in the congregation, such as men’s and women’s clubs, Bible study, youth organizations, and Sunday school. Through the institutional network of the church or synagogue, religious beliefs connect people to one another and reinforce the ideas that initially led them to join.

Religious organizations in non-Christian cultures are defined very differently, and the ways they organize and connect people to one another are also very different. In India, for example, Hindu temples are seemingly everywhere. Some are very small and simple, whereas others are grand and elaborate. The idea of a stable congregation holding regularly scheduled services, as is done in the religious practices of Christianity and Judaism, is unknown. People may develop a level of comfort and affiliation with a particular temple, but they don’t “join the congregation” and attend prayer meetings. They simply worship in whatever temple and at whatever time they deem appropriate.

Interpersonal Communication Patterns The face-to-face verbal and nonverbal coding systems that cultures develop to convey meanings and intentions are called *interpersonal communication patterns*. These patterns include links among parents, siblings, peers, teachers, relatives, neighbors, employers, authority figures, and other social contacts.

Differences in interpersonal communication patterns both cause and result from cultural differences. Verbal communication systems, or languages, give each culture a common set of categories and distinctions with which to organize perceptions. These common categories are used to sort objects and ideas and to give meaning to shared experiences. Nonverbal communication systems provide information about the meanings associated with the use of space, time, touch, and gestures. They help to define the boundaries between members and nonmembers of a culture.

Interpersonal communication patterns are also important in maintaining the structure of a culture because they are the means through which a culture transmits its beliefs and practices from one generation to another. The primary agents for conveying these basic tenets are usually parents, but the entire network of interpersonal relationships provides unrelenting messages about the preferred ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and acting in relation to problems with which the culture must cope. For instance, when a major storm causes death and the destruction of valuable property, the explanations given can shape the future of the culture. An explanation that says “God is punishing the people because they have disobeyed” shapes a different perception of the relationship among humans, nature, and spirituality than an explanation that says “Disasters such as this one happen because of tornadoes and storms that are unrelated to human actions.”

Cultures organize and assign a level of importance to their interpersonal communication patterns in various ways, and the level of importance assigned in turn influences other aspects of the culture. Ideas concerning such basic interpersonal relationships as *family* and *friend* often differ because of unique cultural expectations about the obligations and privileges that should be granted to a particular network of people. In the United States, for instance, college students consider it appropriate to live hundreds of miles from home if doing so will allow them to pursue the best education. Many Mexican college students, however, have refused similar educational opportunities because in Mexico one's family relationships are often more important than individual achievement. In the Republic of Korea, family members are so closely tied to one another in a hierarchy based on age and gender that the oldest male relative typically has the final say on such important matters as where to attend school, what profession to pursue, and whom to marry.

Because an understanding of cultural differences in interpersonal communication patterns is so crucial to becoming interculturally competent, it is a central feature of this book. Subsequent chapters will focus specifically on the importance of interpersonal communication patterns and will consider more general issues about the nature of interpersonal communication among cultures.

The Interrelatedness of Cultural Forces

Although we have discussed the forces that influence the creation and development of cultural patterns as if each operated independently of all the others, we do wish to emphasize that they are all interrelated. Each force affects and is affected by all of the others. Each works in conjunction with the others by pushing and pulling on the members of a culture to create a series of constraints that alter the cultural patterns.

As an example of the interrelationship among these powerful forces, consider the effects of population, religion, resource availability, and life expectancy on the formation of certain cultural values and practices in Ireland and India during the late nineteenth century.²⁴ In Ireland, the population was large relative to the available food, and severe food shortages were common. Therefore, there was a pressing need to reduce the size of the population. Because the Irish were predominantly Catholic, artificial methods of birth control were unacceptable. Given the negative cultural value associated with birth control and the problems of overpopulation and lack of food, a cultural practice evolved that women did not marry before the age of about thirty. The population was reduced, of course, by the delay in marriages. India, at about that same time, also had harsh economic conditions, but the average life expectancy was about twenty-eight years, and nearly half of the children died before age five. Given that reality, a cultural value evolved that the preferred age for an Indian woman to marry was around twelve or thirteen. That way, all childbearing years were available for procreation, thus increasing the chances for the survival of the culture.

Cultural adaptations and accommodations, however extreme, are rarely made consciously. Rather, cultures attempt to adjust to their unique configuration of forces by altering the shared and often unquestioned cultural assumptions that guide their thoughts and actions. Thus, changes in a culture's institutions or traditions cause its members to alter their behaviors in some important ways. These alterations, in turn, foster additional adjustments to the institutions or traditions in a continual process of adaptation and accommodation.

Jared Diamond has suggested that it is the interrelationship of these cultural forces that explains the European conquest of the Americas.²⁵ Why, Diamond asks, were western Europeans able to conquer the indigenous cultures that were living in the Americas, rather than the other way around? Why didn't the native cultures of North and South America conquer Europe? Why, in other words, did the European cultures become disproportionately powerful? In a thorough and well-reasoned argument, Diamond concludes very convincingly that the answers to his questions are unrelated to any biological differences that might have existed; cultural differences in intellect, initiative, ingenuity, and cognitive adaptability have been minor, and the variability of these mental attributes within each culture has been so much greater than their variations across cultures. Rather, the explanation for who-conquered-whom begins with two important environmental or ecological advantages that western Europeans had over the native peoples of the Americas, which lead to institutional, technological, and biological advantages.

The first ecological advantage of the Europeans was the availability of a large number of wild species that had the potential to be domesticated. The variety of these domesticated plants and large animals provided food, transportation, mechanical power, carrying ability, and military advantages. By happenstance, an enormous range of possibilities for domestication was available to the Europeans but not to the cultures living in the Americas. Both massive varieties of plants (grains, fruits, vegetables) and the ready availability of many types of large animals (sheep, goats, cows, pigs, and horses) provided the Europeans with many opportunities for domestication that their counterparts in the Americas simply did not have.

The second ecological advantage of the Europeans was the shape and topography of Europe. Unlike the Americas, Europe has an east-west axis. Axis orientation affects the likelihood that domesticated crops will be able to spread, since locales that are east and west of each other, and therefore at about the same latitude, share the same day length and its seasonal variations. Seeds that are genetically programmed to germinate and grow in specific climatic conditions will likely be able to produce food to the east or the west of their initial locations, but typically they will not grow if planted far to the north or south.

These ecological advantages led to the production and storage of large quantities of food, which in turn encouraged the growth of larger communities. This is so because an acre of land can feed more herders and farmers—often, up to a hundred times more—than it can hunter-gatherers. Domesticated plants and animals provided not just food but also the raw materials for making many other useful items: clothing, blankets, tools, weapons, machinery, and much more.

As populations grew, so too did two additional forces: an increased complexity in the institutional networks, and biological changes in the form of resistance to infectious diseases. First, large population densities must pay much more attention to issues of social control. Rulers, bureaucracies, complex political units, hierarchical organizational structures, and the concentration of wealth are all required to accomplish large public projects and to sustain armies for defense and conquest. Domestication of plants and animals also meant that some people who were not needed for food production could become the specialists who managed the bureaucracies or who developed and manufactured useful products.

Second, there is a powerful biological relationship among population density, the availability of domesticated animals, and the spread of infectious diseases. Most of the major epidemics—smallpox, tuberculosis, malaria, plague, measles, influenza, cholera, typhus,

diphtheria, mumps, pertussis, yellow fever, syphilis, gonorrhea, AIDS, and many more—originally jumped to humans from diseases that were carried by animals. Epidemics end when those who are available to be infected either die or become immune. Because many generations of Europeans had been exposed to the infectious diseases that initially came from their domesticated animals, they were able to survive the epidemics that they subsequently spread to the Americas (inadvertently or otherwise) with devastating consequences. (The number of native peoples in the Americas, estimated at about 20 million when Columbus arrived, was down to about 1 million two centuries later.) In sum, Diamond asserts,

Plant and animal domestication meant much more food and hence much denser human populations. The resulting food surpluses, and (in some areas) the animal-based means of transporting those surpluses, were a prerequisite for the development of settled, politically centralized, socially stratified, economically complex, technologically innovative societies. Hence the availability of domestic plants and animals ultimately explains why empires, literacy, and steel weapons developed earliest in Eurasia and later, or not at all, on other continents. The military uses of horses and camels, and the killing-power of animal derived germs, complete the list of major links between food production and conquest.²⁶

▶▶▶ Intercultural Communication

A simple way to define the term *intercultural communication* is to use the definition of *communication* that was provided in the previous chapter and insert the phrase “from different cultures.” This addition would yield the following definition:

Intercultural communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings.

This definition, although accurate, is difficult to apply. In the following examples, we describe several situations and ask you to analyze them with this definition in mind. Our intention in the discussion that follows is to give you a more sophisticated understanding of the term *intercultural communication* by exploring more fully the meaning of the phrase “people from different cultures.”

Examples of Intercultural Interactions

Read the description of each interaction and think carefully about the questions that follow. Decide whether you think the communication between the people involved is or is not intercultural. Our answers to these questions are provided in the subsequent discussion.

EXAMPLE 1

Dele is from Nigeria and Anibal is from Argentina. Both young men completed secondary education in their own countries and then came to the United States to study. They studied at the same university, lived in the same dormitory their first year on campus, and chose agriculture as their major. Eventually, they became roommates, participated in many of the same activities for international students, and had many classes together. After completing their bachelor's degrees, they en-

rolled in the same graduate program. After four more years in the United States, each returned to his home country and took a position in the country's Agricultural Ministry. In letters to each other, both comment on the difficulties that they are experiencing in working with farmers from their own country.

Questions for Example 1

- ▶ When they first begin their studies in the United States, is the communication between Dele and Anibal intercultural communication?
- ▶ When they complete their studies in the United States, is the communication between Dele and Anibal intercultural communication?
- ▶ After they return to their home countries, is the communication between each man and the farmers with whom they work intercultural communication?

EXAMPLE 2

Janet grew up in a small town of about 3,500 people in western Massachusetts. She is surrounded by her immediate family, many other relatives, and lots of friends. Her parents grew up in this same town, but Janet is determined to have experiences away from her family and away from the small portion of New England that has formed the boundaries of her existence. Despite parental concerns, Janet goes to one of California's major public universities, which is located in a large urban area, and she begins her life in the West. Janet is at first excited and thrilled to be living in California, but within a very short period of time, she begins to feel very isolated. She is assigned to live in a coeducational dormitory, and she finds it disconcerting to be meeting male students as she walks down the hallway in her bathrobe. Although her fellow students seem friendly, her overtures for coffee or movies or even studying together are usually met with a smile and a statement that “It would be great, but. . .” The superficial friendliness of most of the people she meets starts to annoy her, and Janet becomes bad-tempered and irritable.

Questions for Example 2

- ▶ Is the culture of Massachusetts sufficiently different from that of California to characterize Janet's communication with her fellow students as intercultural?
- ▶ Would Janet have had the same kinds of feelings and reactions if she had moved into a coeducational dormitory at a university in urban Massachusetts?

EXAMPLE 3

Even though Andy Wong's parents immigrated to the United States from Taiwan before he was born, they still speak Chinese at home and expect Andy and his brothers and sisters to behave like proper Chinese children. Because Andy is the eldest child, his parents have additional expectations for him. Andy loves his parents very much, but he finds their expectations difficult to fulfill. He thinks he speaks respectfully to his mother when he tells her that he is going out with his

friends after dinner, but his parents tell him he is being disrespectful. The family reaches a major crisis when Andy announces that he is going to go to a college that has a good studio arts program, rather than pursue the solid science background his parents want him to have in preparation for medical school.

Question for Example 3

- ▶ Is Andy's communication with his parents intercultural, either because Andy is very U.S. American and his parents are Chinese or because parents and children have different cultures?

EXAMPLE 4

Jane Martin works for a U.S. company that has a major branch in South Korea. Although Jane is fairly young, her boss has asked her to travel to Seoul to teach her Korean counterparts a new internal auditing system. Despite Jane's lack of linguistic skill in Korean (she speaks no Korean) and little experience in another country (she has spent a week in London and a week in Paris on holiday), she is confident that she will be successful in teaching the Korean employees the new system. She has won high praise for her training skills in the United States, and the company promises to provide her with a good interpreter. "After all," Jane thinks, "we're all part of the same company—we do the same kinds of work with the same kinds of corporate regulations and expectations. Besides, Koreans are probably familiar with U.S. Americans."

Questions for Example 4

- ▶ Is Jane's communication with South Koreans intercultural, or does working for the same corporation mean that Jane and her South Korean counterparts share a common culture?
- ▶ Is Jane's age a factor in communication with her Korean counterparts?
- ▶ Would you answer the previous questions any differently if Jane's company were sending her to the branch office in England rather than to the one in South Korea?

EXAMPLE 5

Angela enjoys watching soap operas on television. In fact, she's a real soap opera fanatic; she reads *Soap Opera Digest* for the summaries of the episodes, arranges her day to be able to watch her favorite shows, and uses her videocassette recorder to tape the ones she must miss. One afternoon, as Angela switches through the cable channels looking for her regular program, she stops at a channel with a program in Spanish that she immediately recognizes as a soap opera. Fascinated, Angela watches the entire program and believes that, despite having no knowledge of Spanish, she has followed the plot line accurately.

Questions for Example 5

- ▶ Do you accept Angela's assessment that she understood the Spanish soap opera because soap opera plots are all similar?
- ▶ Can intercultural communication take place even if those communicating do not share a common language?

EXAMPLE 6

John has worked for the same company, based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for the six years since his graduation from college. A recent promotion means that John has to move to his company's branch office in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. John faces difficulties almost immediately after beginning work in Milwaukee. His boss has a much different management style than the one with which John is familiar. His new job responsibilities require some knowledge and sophistication in areas in which John is not an expert. After several months on the job, John is feeling fairly beleaguered and is beginning to lose confidence in his abilities.

Question for Example 6

- ▶ Is John's communication with his boss intercultural communication?

Each of these examples represents a likely communication event in today's world. It is very probable that two people from different countries will spend an extended period of time in a third country, as Dele and Anibal have. It is also very likely that these two people will, over time, form relationships that create a shared set of experiences. Moving from one part of a country to another is a commonplace occurrence, whether the goal is to attend a university, as Janet did, or to advance professionally, as John did. Immigration of people from one country to another also occurs frequently, producing communication problems typical of those experienced by U.S.-born-and-raised Andy with his Chinese-born-and-identified parents. The significance of the global marketplace means that work often takes people to countries around the world, as companies like Jane's become increasingly multinational. With the advent of modern communication technologies, many more people will be able to select television programs, films, music, radio shows, and computerized messages that are arranged in verbal and nonverbal codes different from their own. Angela's experience with the Spanish soap opera will be repeatable almost everywhere. But are these examples, all of which involve communication, also examples of intercultural communication? Do any of them clearly *not* involve intercultural communication? In the next sections we attempt to provide answers to these questions.

Similarities and Differences between Communicators

By applying the definition of intercultural communication given at the beginning of the chapter, it would be relatively simple to categorize each example. You would go through the examples and make a bipolar choice—either yes or no—based on whether the people in

the examples were from different cultures. Thus, you would probably decide that the communication between Anibal and Dele was intercultural when they arrived in the United States. It would be much more difficult to judge their communication after they completed their studies. Perhaps you would decide that their communication with people from their own country following their return home was not intercultural, or perhaps you would say that it was. Similarly, you might be convinced that California is indeed a different culture from Massachusetts, or you might argue vehemently that it is not. Most likely you would decide that Jane's communication with her Korean counterparts was intercultural, even though they undoubtedly did share some common expectations about work performance because the same company employed them. Had her company decided to send Jane to England instead of to Korea, her communication with her English coworkers would have been similarly intercultural. Yet you might feel a bit uncomfortable, as we are, with the idea of putting U.S.–Korean communication into the same category as U.S.–English communication.

The difficulties encountered in a simple yes-or-no decision lead us to suggest an alternative way of thinking about intercultural communication. What is missing is an answer to three questions that emerge from the preceding examples:

1. What differences among groups of people constitute cultural differences?
2. How extensive are those differences?
3. How does extended communication change the effects of cultural differences?

This last question suggests the possibility that initially one's interactions could be very intercultural, but subsequent communication events could make the relationship far less intercultural.

To demonstrate the importance of these questions, we would like you to take the examples presented earlier and arrange them in order from most intercultural to least intercultural.²⁷ Use a continuum like the one shown in Figure 2.1.

Thus, you will be identifying the degree of interculturalness in each interaction and, in effect, you will be creating an "interculturalness" scale. It should even be possible to make distinctions among those communication situations that are placed in the middle, with some closer and some farther from the most intercultural end. When you place the examples on a continuum, they might look something like Figure 2.2.

We suspect that the continuum you have created is very similar to ours. Where we might disagree is on how we ordered the examples placed near the middle.

The next important issue for understanding the definition of intercultural communication concerns the characteristics present in the encounters. What is it about the people, the communication, the situation, or some combination of those factors that increases the likelihood that the communication will be intercultural?



FIGURE 2.1 A continuum of interculturalness.

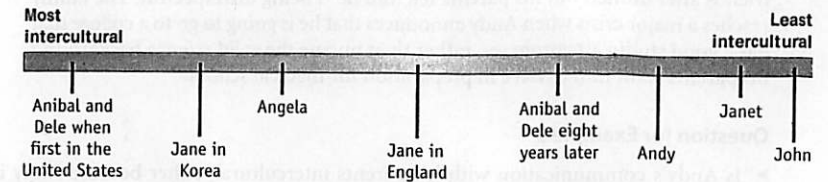


FIGURE 2.2 A continuum of interculturalness, with examples.

What varies and changes across the examples is the degree of similarity or the amount of difference between the interactants. For instance, Anibal (from Argentina) and Dele (from Nigeria) are very different when they first come to study in the United States. Each speaks English, but as a second language to Spanish and Yoruba, respectively; their facility with English is initially weak, and they are uncomfortable with it. In addition, their values, social customs, gestures, perceptions of attractiveness, and expectations about personal space and how friendships are established differ. Initially, Anibal and Dele are culturally very different, and their communication should certainly be placed near the "most intercultural" end of the continuum. However, after eight years in the United States, having studied the same academic subjects, shared many of the same friends, and participated in many common experiences, their communication with each other does not have the same degree of interculturalness as it did initially. Certainly, each still retains part of his own cultural heritage and point of view, but the two men have also created an important set of common understandings between themselves that is not grounded in their respective cultural frameworks.

Janet, in contrast, was placed near the "least intercultural" end of the continuum because of the degree of similarity, or homogeneity, she shares with Californians. They speak the same language, and their values, gestures, social perceptions, and expectations about relationships are all similar. Certainly, Californians use slang and jargon with which Janet is not familiar, but they speak, read, and study in English. And certainly, Californians, particularly urban Californians, seem to place importance on different things than Janet does. She also thinks it unusual and a bit uncomfortable to be sharing a living space with men she does not even know. Nevertheless, the magnitude of these differences is relatively small.

There are learned differences among groups of people that are associated with their culture, such as cultural patterns, verbal and nonverbal codes, relationship rules and roles, and social perceptions. When such important differences are relatively large, they lead to dissimilar interpretations about the meanings of the messages that are created, and they therefore indicate that people are from different cultures. Thus,

People are from different cultures whenever the degree of difference between them is sufficiently large and important that it creates dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent communication behaviors.

CULTURE *connections*

My parents didn't want their daughter to be Korean, but they don't want her fully American, either. Children of immigrants are living paradoxes. We are the first generation and the last. We are in this country for its opportunities, yet filial duty binds us. When my parents boarded the plane, they knew they were embarking on a rough trip. I don't think they imagined the rocks in the path of their daughter.

—Caroline Hwang

Definition of Intercultural Communication

Previous definitions have described the central terms *communication* and *culture*. By combining the meanings of these terms with the ideas suggested in our discussion about the degrees of difference that can occur among people from dissimilar cultures, we offer the following definition of intercultural communication:

Intercultural communication occurs when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently.

The degree to which individuals differ is the degree to which there is interculturalness in a given instance of communication. Situations in which the individuals are very different from one another are most intercultural, whereas those in which the individuals are very similar to one another are least intercultural.

Intercultural Communication and Related Terms

The relationship between culture and communication is important to many disciplines. Consequently, many terms have been used to describe the various ways in which the study of culture and communication intersect: *cross-cultural communication*, *international communication*, *intracultural communication*, *interethnic communication*, and *interracial communication*. The differences among these terms can be confusing, so we would like to relate them to the focus of study in this book.²⁸

Intracultural Communication The term *intercultural*, used to describe one end point of the continuum, denotes the presence of at least two individuals who are culturally different from each other on such important attributes as their value orientations, preferred communication codes, role expectations, and perceived rules of social relationships. We would now like to relabel the “least intercultural” end of the continuum, which is used to refer to communication between culturally similar individuals, as *intracultural*. John's communication with his new boss in Milwaukee is intracultural. Janet's communication with her fellow students in California is more intracultural than intercultural. Both *intercultural* and *intracultural* are comparative terms. That is, each refers to differences in the magnitude and importance of expectations that people have about what constitutes competent communication behaviors.



► Intercultural communication occurs when large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about how to communicate competently.

Interethnic and Interracial Communication Just as *race* and *ethnic group* are terms commonly used to refer to cultures, *interethnic* and *interracial communication* are two labels commonly used as substitutes for *intercultural communication*. Usually, these terms are used to explain differences in communication between members of racial and ethnic groups who are all members of the same nation-state. For example, communication between African Americans and European Americans is often referred to as *interracial communication*. The large numbers of people of Latino origin who work and live with people of European ancestry produce communication characterized as *interethnic*. Sometimes the terms are also used to refer to communication between people from various ethnic or racial groups who are not part of the same nation but live in specific geographic areas. Although it may be useful in some circumstances to use the terms *interethnic* and *interracial*, we believe these types of communication are most usefully categorized as subsets of intercultural communication.

Both ethnicity and race contribute to the perceived effects of cultural differences on communication, which moves that communication toward the “most intercultural” end of the continuum. We will

therefore rely on the broader term of *intercultural communication* when discussing, explaining, and offering suggestions for increasing your degree of competence in interactions that involve people from other races and ethnic groups. In Chapter 6, however, when considering particular cultural biases, we will give special attention to the painful and negative consequences of racism.

Cross-Cultural Communication The term *cross-cultural* is typically used to refer to the study of a particular idea or concept within many cultures. The goal of such investigations is to conduct a series of intracultural analyses in order to compare one culture to another on the attributes of interest. For example, someone interested in studying the marriage rituals in many cultures would be considered a cross-cultural researcher. Scholars who study self-disclosure patterns, child-rearing practices, or educational methods as they exist in

TRY THIS

Describe five interactions in which you have been an active participant and which you would regard as intercultural experiences. Place these five communication experiences on a continuum based on their interculturalness.

CULTURE *connections*

You're general, but you're also specific. A citizen and a person, and the person you are is like nobody else on the planet. Nobody has the exact memory that you have. What is now known is not all that you are capable of knowing. You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human without wealth. What it feels like to be human without domination over others, without reckless arrogance, without fear of others unlike you, without rotating, rehearsing and reinventing the hatreds you learned in the sandbox. And although you don't have complete control over the narrative (no author does, I can tell you), you could nevertheless create it.

—Toni Morrison

many different cultures are doing cross-cultural comparisons. Whereas intercultural communication involves interactions among people from different cultures, cross-cultural communication involves a comparison of interactions among people from the same culture to those from another culture. Although cross-cultural comparisons are very useful for understanding cultural differences, our principle interest is in using these cross-cultural comparisons to understand intercultural communication competence.

International Communication *International communication* refers to interactions among people from different nations. Scholars who compare and analyze nations' media usage also use this term. Certainly, communication among people from different countries is likely to be intercultural communication, but that is not always true, as illustrated by the example of Anibal and Dele after eight years together in the United States. As we suggested with the terms *interracial* and *interethnic communication*, we prefer to focus on *intercultural communication*.

Summary

Our goal in this chapter has been to provide an understanding of some of the key concepts underlying the study of intercultural competence. We began with a discussion of the concept of culture. From the many available approaches to defining culture, we selected one that emphasizes the close relationship between culture and communication. We defined *culture* as a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, norms, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people. We emphasized that people are not born with a culture but learn it through their interactions with others. Our definition located culture in the minds of people, and in

the shared ideas that can be understood by their effects on behavior. We distinguished between culture and other groups to which people belong by suggesting that culture occurs only when beliefs, values, norms, and social practices affect large groups of people. We next made some important distinctions among terms such as *culture*, *nation*, *race*, *ethnic group*, and *subculture*.

We also explored some of the reasons that cultures differ. The shared experiences remembered by cultural members, or a culture's history, were considered first. In the United States, for instance, the lesson of the country's historical experiences affects U.S. Americans' views of their government's relationships

with other countries. The ways in which a culture's unique ecology profoundly alters the collective actions of its people were then illustrated. Next, we discussed the biological or genetic forces affecting cultures. Genetic variations among people are only a small source of cultural differences. We also explained the role of the formal organizations of a culture, the institutional networks such as government, religion, work organizations, and other social organizations. These institutional networks organize groups of individuals and provide the regulations by which the culture functions as a collective. The undisputed effects of technology on a culture were explored next. Technological differences promote vast changes in the ways cultures choose to function. Finally, interpersonal communication patterns, the means by which cultural patterns are transmitted from one generation to another, were considered. These interpersonal communication patterns include the links a culture emphasizes among parents,

siblings, peers, teachers, relatives, neighbors, authority figures, and other social contacts. The reciprocal relationship among these forces suggests the inevitability and constancy of accommodations and changes that characterize all cultures.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of a topic that is central to this book: intercultural communication. We began with several examples, which were followed by an exploration of issues related to similarities and differences among communicators that produce intercultural communication. Finally, after providing our definition of intercultural communication, we differentiated between that term and related terms, including *intracultural*, *interethnic*, *interracial*, *cross-cultural*, and *international communication*. In Chapter 3 we consider an additional concept that is the focal point of this book—intercultural communication competence.

For Discussion

1. What differences are there between the view that "people are born into a culture" versus the opinion that "one becomes a member of a culture through a process of learning"?
2. In the United States, how are the terms *nation*, *race*, *culture*, and *co-culture* used inaccurately?
3. How do you think the ever-present cell phone, as a medium to communicate with others, will change interpersonal relationships within the cultures of the United States?
4. Which current technologies do you think affect and change your culture? How so?
5. What links are there between intercultural communication and interpersonal communication?

For Further Reading

- William B. Gudykunst, *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005). A lucid and insightful guide to theories and theorizing about intercultural communication phenomena.
- A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA: The Museum, 1952). A classic work providing hundreds of definitions of culture by scholars across many disciplines.
- Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester (eds.), *AmongUS: Essays on Identity, Belonging, and Intercultural Competence*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon,

2006). This collection includes many essays, written in the first person, that document the emotions and experiences of people living in a multicultural world.

Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, 2nd ed. (Yarmouth, MA: Intercultural Press, 2001). A straightforward guide to managing one's thinking and emotions as one spends substantial time living in another culture.

For additional information about intercultural films and about Web sites on specific cultures, turn to the Resources section at the back of this book.