Communication Tools for Understanding Cultural Differences

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Cultural Diversity

Montaigne said, "The most universal quality is diversity."[1] Given that diversity abounds, the project of understanding each other is both daunting and important. It is a journey never finished, because the process and the endpoints change constantly. The journey is bound up with communication and conflict, since **misunderstandings** and miscommunication can cause and escalate conflict. **Effective communication** is often the key to making progress in a conflict.

Progress through conflict is possible, and the route is twofold. First, self-knowledge and self-awareness are needed. Without these, our seemingly normal approaches to meaning-making and communication will never be clear enough that we can see them for what they are: a set of lenses that shape what we see, hear, say, understand, and interpret. Second, cultural fluency is needed, meaning familiarity with culture and the ability to act on that familiarity.[2] Cultural fluency means understanding what culture is, how it works, and the ways culture and communication are intertwined with conflicts.

This may sound simple enough, but it actually requires significant, continuous effort. As Edward T. Hall writes in the introduction to his book, *The Dance of Life*,[3] for us to understand each other may mean, "reorganizing [our] thinking...and few people are willing to risk such a radical move." Communication theorists, anthropologists, and others have given us tools to develop awareness of our own lenses, and to facilitate the reorganization of thinking necessary to truly understand others whose starting points may differ from our own. Two of these tools are explored here.

Communication Tools for Understanding Culture

The tools we will examine here relate to communication and ways of seeing the self in relation to others. They are:

Additional insights into **communication tools for understanding cultural differences** are offered by Beyond Intractability project participants.

- High-context and low-context communication, and
- Individualist and communitarian conceptions of self and other.

Since all of these tools are used in the service of understanding culture, a working definition of culture is useful. Donal Carbaugh defines culture as "a system of expressive practices fraught with feelings, a system of symbols, premises, rules, forms, and the domains and dimensions of mutual meanings associated with these."[4] He also suggests culture is "a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and norms, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people."[5] In each of these definitions, culture is linked to communication and a wide range of human experience including feelings, identity, and meaning-making. Communication is the vehicle by which meanings are conveyed, identity is composed and reinforced, and feelings are expressed. As we communicate using different cultural habits and meaning systems, both conflict and harmony are possible outcomes of any interaction.

There is no comprehensive way to understand culture and its relationships to communication and conflict. The two tools outlined here give windows into how different groups of people make sense of their worlds. They are neither reliable guides to every member of a particular group nor are they fixed in nature, since culture is constantly evolving and changing as people within groups and the contexts around them change. These two sets of tools are the most frequently used classifications of cultures used by anthropologists and communication scholars. We begin with one of the most familiar sets of tools: high-context and low-context communication.

High-context and Low-context Communication refers to the degree to which speakers rely on factors other than explicit speech to convey their messages. This tool, developed by Edward T. Hall,[6] suggests that communication varies according to its degree of field dependence, and that it can be classified into two general categories -- high-context and low-context. Field dependence refers to the degree to which things outside the communication itself affect the meaning. For example, a request for a child to "shut the door" relies comparatively little on context, while a comment containing meaning other than what is on the surface relies largely on context for its meaning to be received. A high-context message of disagreement might be telegraphed to a spouse or a co-worker by the words chosen or the way they are spoken, even if no disagreement is explicitly voiced.

Hall says that every human being is confronted by far more sensory stimuli than can possibly be attended to. Cultures help by screening messages, shaping perceptions and interpretations according to a series of selective filters. In high-context settings, the screens are designed to let in implied meanings arising from the physical setting, relational cues, or shared understandings. In low-context settings, the screens direct attention more to the literal meanings of words and less to the context surrounding the words.

All of us engage in both high-context and low-context communication. There are times we "say what we mean, and mean what we say," leaving little to be "read in" to the explicit message. This is low-context communication. At other times, we may infer, imply, insinuate, or deliver with nonverbal cues messages that we want to have conveyed but do not speak. This is high-context communication. Most of the time, we are somewhere nearer the middle of the continuum, relying to some extent on context, but also on the literal meaning of words.

To understand this distinction between high-context and low-context communication, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I tend to "let my words speak for themselves," or prefer to be less direct, relying on what is implied by my communication? (low-context communication)
- Do I prefer indirect messages from others, and am I attuned to a whole range of verbal and nonverbal cues to help me understand the meaning of what is said? (high-context communication)

As will quickly become clear, most people can and do function at both ends of the high-context, low-context continuum. There are times when direct, clear communication is most appropriate, and times when it is preferable to communicate in layers of meaning to save face, spare feelings, or allow for diffuse interpretations. Most people rely on a whole range of verbal and nonverbal cues to understand the meaning of what is said. Even in the most direct, low-context setting, meanings will be conveyed that are not explicitly spoken.

The novelist Amy Tan describes the different starting points of English and Chinese this way: "I try to explain to my English-speaking friends that Chinese language is more strategic in manner,

whereas English tends to be more direct; an American business executive may say, 'Let's make a deal,' and the Chinese manager may reply, 'Is your son interested in learning about your widget business?' Each to his or her own purpose, each with his or her own linguistic path."[7]

As people communicate, they move along a continuum between high context and low context. Depending on the kind of relationship, the situation, and the purpose of communication, they may be more or less explicit and direct. In close relationships, communication short-hand is often used, which makes communication opaque to outsiders but perfectly clear to the parties. With strangers, the same people may choose low-context communication.

Low- and high-context communication refers not only to individual communication strategies, but may be used to understand cultural groups. Generally, Western cultures tend to gravitate toward low-context starting points, while Eastern and Southern cultures tend to use high-context communication. Within these huge categories, there are important differences and many variations. Where high-context communication tends to be featured, it is useful to pay specific attention to nonverbal cues and the behavior of others who may know more of the unstated rules governing the communication. Where low-context communication is the norm, directness is likely to be expected in return.

It is less important to classify any communication as high or low context than it is to understand whether nonverbal or verbal cues are the most prominent. Without this understanding, those who tend to use high-context starting points may be looking for shades of meaning that are not present, and those who prefer low-context communication may miss important nuances of meaning.

The choice of high-context and low-context as labels has led to unfortunate misunderstandings, since there is an implied ranking in the adjectives. In fact, neither is better or worse than the other. They are simply different. Each has possible pitfalls for cross-cultural communicators. Generally, low-context communicators interacting with high-context communicators should be mindful that

- nonverbal messages and gestures may be as important as what is said;
- status and identity may be communicated nonverbally and require appropriate acknowledgement;
- face-saving and tact may be important, and need to be balanced with the desire to communicate fully and frankly;
- building a good relationship can contribute to effectiveness over time; and
- indirect routes and creative thinking are important alternatives to problem-solving when blocks are encountered.

High-context communicators interacting with low-context communicators should be mindful that

- things can be taken at face value rather than as representative of layers of meaning;

- roles and functions may be decoupled from status and identity;
- efficiency and effectiveness may be served by a sustained focus on tasks;
- direct questions and observations are not necessarily meant to offend, but to clarify and advance shared goals; and
- indirect cues may not be enough to get the other's attention.[8]

As communicators factor awareness of high-context and low-context communication into their relations, conflict may be lessened and even prevented.

Individualism and Communitarianism is the second dimension important to conflict and conflict resolution. In communitarian settings (sometimes called collectivist settings), children are taught that they are part of a circle of relations. This identity as a member of a group comes first, summed up in the South African idea of ubuntu: "I am because we are." In communitarian settings, members are rewarded for allegiance to group norms and values, interdependence, and cooperation. Wherever they go, their identity as a member of their group goes out in front. **Identity** is not isolated from others, but is determined with others according to group needs and views. When conflict arises, behavior and responses tend to be jointly chosen.

Individualist patterns involve ideas of the self as independent, self-directed, and autonomous. Many Western conflict-resolution approaches presuppose exactly this kind of person: someone able to make proposals, concessions, and maximize gains in their own self-interest. Children raised in this milieu are rewarded for initiative, personal achievement, and individual leadership. They may be just as close to their families as a child raised in a communitarian setting, but they draw the boundaries differently: in case of a conflict, they may feel more free to choose their individual preference. Duty, honor, and deference to authority are less prominent for those with individualist starting points than communitarian ones.

Individual and communitarian identities are two quite different ways of being in the world. They connect at some point, of course, since all groups are made up of individuals and all individuals find themselves in relationship with various groups. But the starting points are different. To discern the basic difference, ask yourself which is most in the foreground of your life, the welfare, development, security, prosperity, and well-being of yourself and others as individuals, or the shared heritage, ecological resources, traditional stories, and group accomplishments of your people? Generally, those who start with individualism as their beginning tend to be most comfortable with independence, personal achievement, and a competitive conflict style. Those who start with a communal orientation are more focused on social connections, service, and a cooperative conflict style.

French anthropologist Raymonde Carroll, who is married to a North American, suggests that North Americans tend to see individual identities as existing outside all networks. This does not mean that social networks do not exist, or that they are unimportant, but that it is notionally possible to see the self apart from these. In the North American view, there is a sense that the self creates its own identity, as in the expression, a "self-made person." This view explains why it is unnecessary for North Americans to hide things about their past, such as humble origins. It

also explains why the alcoholic brother of a president of the United States is seen as having no connection to the president's standing or ability. In a communitarian setting, identity is defined much more by the person's social network, and cannot be so easily separated.

One way to discern communitarian or individualist starting points is to listen to forms of greeting and address. Thomas Morning Owl, a member of the Confederated Umatilla Tribes in Oregon, reports that his response to the question 'Shinnamwa?' (Who are you?) would not be his name, but a description of his father, mother, and tribe, and the place they came from. Morning Owl reflects that individual identities are subsumed into the collective in his culture: "Who preceded you, is who you are."[9]

Members of communitarian cultures place less importance than individualists on relationships with outsiders, such as strangers or casual acquaintances. Boundaries around relationships tend to be less porous in communitarian contexts like Japan, where attention is focused on maintaining harmony and cohesion with the group. In the individualist setting of the United States, by contrast, "friendly" behavior is directed to members of in-groups and strangers alike. This difference can lead to misunderstandings across cultures, since the U.S. American behavior of friendliness to strangers may be seen as inappropriately familiar by those from communitarian settings, while U.S. Americans may find social networks in communitarian settings very difficult to penetrate.

No matter which starting point seems natural, it is important to keep the entire continuum in mind when trying to understand and address conflict. From each vantage point, it is useful to remember some things:

From an individualist starting point,

- achievement involves individual goal-setting and action;
- I am ultimately accountable to myself and must make decisions I can live with;
- while I consult with others about choices, I am autonomous: a discrete circle; and
- I believe in equality and consider everyone able to make their own personal choices.

From a communitarian starting point,

- maintaining group harmony and cohesion is important, and my decisions should not disrupt that;
- choices are made in consultation with family and authority figures and their input is weighted as heavily, or even more heavily, than mine. I am an overlapping circle amidst other overlapping circles;
- my decisions reflect on my group and I am accountable to them as a member; and
- I notice hierarchy and accept direction from those of higher status than myself.

With these differences in mind, it is important for individualists to recognize the web of relations encompassing the communitarian party to a conflict, and to act in recognition of those. Similarly, it is helpful for those from communitarian settings to remember that individualists value autonomy and initiative, and to act in ways that respect these preferences.

Combining Starting Points: High-Context/Low-Context and Individualism/Communitarianism

As with any set of starting points, neither of these starting points exists in isolation. High-context communication often corresponds with communitarian settings, just as low-context communication often occurs in individualist settings. This is not always true, but it is worth exploring because it is frequently the case. Where communitarianism is the preferred starting point, individual expression may be less important than group will. Indirect communication that draws heavily on nonverbal cues may be preferable in such a setting, because it allows for multiple meanings, saves face, leaves room for group input into decisions, and displays interdependence. In individualist settings, low-context communication may be preferable because it is direct, expresses individual desires and initiatives, displays independence, and clarifies the meaning intended by the speaker.

Nobel Peace Laureate Jimmy Carter understood the importance of high-context communication with his counterparts from Israel and Egypt in the historic Camp David peace negotiations. In one example, Carter reports that Prime Minister Begin was about to leave the negotiations after several days, discouraged at having reached an impasse. Carter met Begin at his accommodations and presented him with pictures of the three heads of state, inscribed with the names of each of Begin's grandchildren. Prime Minister Begin repeated the names of his grandchildren out loud as he paused to look at the pictures, seeming to reflect on the importance of the peace negotiations to the grandchildren's futures.

Carter knew instinctively that no direct, low-context appeal would work to bring Prime Minister Begin back to the negotiating table. Perhaps low-context requests were already tried without success. Instead, Carter relied on a high-context reference to legacy, future generations, and the relations that Begin cared about. He invoked the communities each leader served by reminding Begin of his grandchildren. Through Carter's masterful, high-context appeal, negotiations resumed and peace was achieved between neighbors who had been in intractable conflict for many years. [10]

This example shows the importance of these two interrelated starting points, individualism/communitarianism and low/high context. While there are many exceptions to cultural patterns and all of us use different starting points depending on the context, noticing the intersections of ways of making meaning is often a useful window into conflict dynamics.

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[1] Montaigne, 1580. Quoted in Tracy Novinger. *Intercultural Communication*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001)

[2] This is closely related to the concept of **framing**.

[3] Edward T. Hall, *The Dance of Life. The Other Dimension of Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 7.

[4] Donal Carbaugh, *Intercultural Theory* [on-line] Available from **http://eco.ittralee.ie/personal/theories-III.php#1 (http://eco.ittralee.ie/personal/theories-III.php#1)** ; Internet.

[5] Lustig, Myron and Jolene Koester. 1998. *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal CommunicationAcross Cultures* (3rd Ed.). (Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1998), 30.

[6] Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*. (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1971)

[7] Tan, Amy. "The Language of Discretion," in *About Language 3rd Ed*., E.H.Roberts and G. Turgeon, eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), 142.

[8] These points are taken from Michelle LeBaron, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts: New Approaches for a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003)

[9] Quoted in Tracy Novinger, *Intercultural Communication* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001), 31.

[10] Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 392, 399.

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