



Culture Talk: The Influence of Culture on Communication

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Abstract

Communication is a behavior affected by culture. What one is taught affects the values one maintains and how one behaves. The purpose of this research, which explores the influence of culture on communication, is to encourage understanding of how culture affects the messages one delivers and how one communicates. This study investigates how cultural values affect communication behaviors, how culture influences verbal communication behaviors and nonverbal communication behaviors, as well as how culture affects the use of interruptions. Data were gathered through interviews from a sample of 24 participants representing 20 cultures. Interviewees included international students and scholars, immigrants and American Indians. Results, for example, suggest: (1) the importance in many cultures of using certain forms or titles to show respect, (2) some cultures communicate more indirectly than do U.S. Americans, yet some more directly, (3) many interviewees experience shock about how to respond in the U.S. to the question, "How are you?" (4) differences among cultures concerning who may touch whom, how much and in what context, (5) differences concerning the appropriate use of eye contact and (6) a number of gestures used in some cultures that are not used in the U.S.

Introduction

The study of intercultural communication, which concerns the interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds, attempts to discover how people from distinctively diverse cultures endeavor to communicate. Communication - a behavior - has the potential to be influenced by one's culture. The intercultural interviews conducted in this study explore how culture, which can be thought of as "everything that people have, think or do" or "programming of the mind," influences communication. This research provides empirical data illustrating that an individual's culture (mental programming), including the values, verbal and nonverbal behaviors one has been taught, affects the messages one delivers as well as how one communicates.

This research is significant as it provides recent, real-life examples demonstrating the influence of culture on communication. The study of intercultural communication is mandated by issues of globalization, changing patterns of domestic and international migration, advances in internet technology that allow people worldwide to connect with each other, the need to understand ethical issues from a cultural perspective and opportunities for peace. The findings from this research can be applied to business, political and social settings. Today's international marketplace demands globally and inter-culturally competent communicators. The key to such competence is cultural intelligence.

This study investigates: (1) how cultural values (i.e., individualism/collectivism, power distance and perceptions of time) affect communication behaviors, (2) how culture influences language, including the use of formal and informal forms, as well as direct and indirect linguistic styles and (3) how culture affects interpersonal distance (proxemics), touch (haptics) and eye contact (oculesics).

Review of Literature

- Cultural values, i.e. individualism/collectivism, power distance, time (i.e. polychronic and/or monochronic)
- Language, verbal and linguistic styles, i.e. the use of formal/informal forms, direct and indirect linguistic styles
- Nonverbal communication behaviors, i.e. interpersonal distance (proxemics), touch (haptics), eye contact (oculesics)

Selected Research Questions

- Which cultures maintain the cultural value of individualism? Collectivism?
- How do perceptions of time (polychronic and monochronic) compare with how time is viewed in the U.S.?
- Which cultures use an indirect style of language? Direct style of language?
- Which cultures require the use of formal forms in their language to recognize and respect particular people for their personal achievements, education and/or occupation?
- What, if anything, is the most difficult aspect of English or the U.S. American language to learn or understand?
- Research suggests U.S. Americans engaged in conversation will assume a social distance of approximately 4-7' between each other during normal conversations. How do expectations about standards of personal space in various cultures compare with how space between people is practiced in the U.S.?
- What is the level of touch in various cultures?
- What is the level of eye contact in various cultures?
- What gestures used in other cultures are not used in the U.S.?
- What, if anything, has been the most difficult aspect of U.S. or Midwestern culture to which the interviewees have had to adapt?

Survey Method

Measurement Techniques and Operational Procedures

- Interviews and observation
- Qualitative data gathered through 20 face-to-face, audio-recorded interviews
- Series of open and closed-ended questions explored areas including: identity, verbal communication, nonverbal communication, values and culture shock
- Student researchers included four undergraduates (two interviewers, one transcriber and one audio engineer)
- Interviews recorded in radio studio between October 2008 and March 2009
- Interviews broadcast as "Culture Talk" episodes on WUEC 89.7FM (November 9-23, 2008 & March 29-May 17, 2009)
- Self-reports and others' reports used to measure target behaviors

Sample and Participants

- Non-random (convenience and purposive)
- N=20 cultures with 24 participants, including: (1) international students and scholars studying at the UW-Eau Claire from Austria, Bolivia, China (Dongmei), China (Zhiping), Ethiopia, Germany, Kuwait, Malaysia, Moldova, Nepal, South Korea, Spain, Tunisia and Ukraine, (2) community members who emigrated from other cultures (Kenya, Iran, Laos and Portugal) and (3) American Indians (Anishinaabe/Ojibwe and Lakota Rosebud Sioux Nations)
- 16 women and eight men
- Research approved by Institutional Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects
- All interviewees provided informed consent; confidentiality not guaranteed

Data Analysis

- Each interview was transcribed
- To gain a quantitative understanding of some measures, common responses to certain questions were grouped
- Researchers analyzed the qualitative data by transcribing the words as spoken by the interviewees; responses were quoted and/or paraphrased

Selected Results (See examples of qualitative comments in glass container(s) on table)

- **Collectivism:** Anishinaabe/Ojibwe, Bolivia, China (2), Ethiopia, Hmong-American, Iran, Kenya, Kuwait, Lakota, Malaysia, Moldova, Nepal, Portugal, South Korea, Spain and Ukraine
- **Collectivism in Transition:** South Korea
- **Individualism:** Austria and Ukraine (in classroom only)
- **Individualism and Collectivism:** China (Zhiping), Germany and Tunisia
- **Indirect Style of Language:** Bolivia, China (Dongmei), Ethiopia, Kenya, Kuwait, Iran, Lakota, Malaysia, Moldova, Nepal and South Korea
- **Direct Style of Language:** Austria, Germany, Spain and Ukraine
- **Direct and Indirect Style of Language:** Anishinaabe/Ojibwe, China (Zhiping), Hmong-American, Portugal, and Tunisia
- **Formal Language Required, e.g., to show respect:** Austria, Bolivia, China (2), Ethiopia, Germany, Hmong-American (relationships & titles), Iran (not mandatory, but could be used when talking about one's parents, the prophet Mohamed, etc.), Kenya, Kuwait (not required; instead, adjust body position or say the phrase, "son of" or "Abu" to show respect), Malaysia, Moldova, Nepal, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Tunisia and Ukraine
- **High Touch:** Anishinaabe/Ojibwe, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Iran, Moldova, Spain and Ukraine
- **Medium Touch:** China (Zhiping), Germany, Portugal and Tunisia
- **Low Touch:** Austria, China (Dongmei), Hmong-American and South Korea
- **Touch Restricted (e.g., by religion):** Hmong -American, Iran, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia and Nepal
- **Touch is Changing (e.g., generational difference and/or globalization):** Hmong-American and South Korea
- **Note:** Lakota interviewee did not comment about the level of touch.

Reliability & Validity

- **Measurement Reliability:** (1) Measurement error reduced as interviewers trained and instrument pilot tested; (2) reliability assessed through internal consistency
- **Internal Validity:** (1) Participants selected for research were valid members of population of interest; (2) a semi-structured interview schedule was used, with each interview conducted in a consistent manner; (3) each interview was conducted in the same type of environment (radio studio)
- **Measurement Validity:** (1) interview schedule is strong in face validity; (2) interview schedule was pilot tested
- **External Validity:** (1) Although sample is non-random, researchers were able to replicate previous findings for many questions; (2) study is strong in ecological validity as research (face-to-face interviews) mirrors real-life conditions

Limitations

- Non-random sample (purposive and convenience)
- 16 of 24 participants were university students, who may not have been able to comment accurately about questions concerning business communication



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