The Influence of Culture on Interpersonal Communication

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Learning Objectives

In this chapter, readers will explore the essential associations between culture and interpersonal communication. By the end of this chapter, readers will be able to

- Define culture and co-culture
- Understand how culture and media are related
- Distinguish between primary and secondary identities, including explaining how cultural identity and communication are related
- Comprehend the role that cultural membership—including context, individualism, collectivism, and time orientation—plays in how we communicate with others
- Use strategies to strengthen interpersonal communication competence

Introduction

In 2008, reporter Malcolm Gladwell published *Outliers: The Story of Success,* a compilation of human events that are extreme, unusual, and outside of one's normal experience. Chapter 7 of this book, entitled "The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes," recounts a particularly unusual pattern—one that even Gladwell himself admitted on his website was the most surprising to him ("What Is *Outliers* About?" 2013): the influence of commercial airline pilots' cultural background on how they communicate while in the air. Using examples from actual National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) transcripts, Gladwell reveals that the causes of multiple plane crashes can be partially explained by the pilots' inability to competently communicate with one another or with Air Traffic Control (ATC), and that this communication difficulty is associated with culture.

When first officers, who are subordinate to captains in the hierarchy of the airline industry, tried to alert the captain of a problem, officers from cultures that prescribe deferential treatment to superiors used hints or softened speech to get their point across. In other words, even in potential life-or-death situations such as airline emergencies, cultural rules and norms were so ingrained in these first officers that they were simply unable to use direct and clear messages to notify their captains. Instead, the first officers chose to sugarcoat or downplay the significance of the situations. According to Gladwell (2008), NTSB transcripts present examples of the hints used by first officers in developing or actual airline emergencies, some of which include

- "Look how the ice is just hanging on his, ah, back, back there, see that?" (to captain, after noticing that there is a dangerous level of ice on the plane's wings, p. 196)
- "Climb and maintain three thousand, and ah, we're running out of fuel, sir." (to ATC, after being asked by the captain to tell ATC that they were in an emergency due to low fuel, p. 199)
- "Don't you think it rains more? In this area here?" (a subtle warning to the captain against doing a visual approach while landing in terrible, rainy weather, p. 213)

In each of the above instances, the plane crashed, and lives were ultimately lost. Gladwell summarizes this outlier when saying, "How good a pilot is, it turns out, has a lot to do with where that pilot is from—that is, the culture he or she was raised in" ("What Is *Outliers* About?" 2013, para. 6). Airlines with such issues during the 1990s, such as Korean Air, recognized these outlier patterns and took important steps to correct them, but miscommunications can still occur. However, the results of these efforts have been overwhelmingly successful, with a significant reduction in airline crashes in the last decade. This is a sobering example of just how much culture influences (and is influenced by) how we communicate, regardless of situation or context.

Chapter 3 examines the ways that culture and interpersonal communication shape and influence one another. In this chapter, we define *culture* and *co-cultures* and explore how certain cultural identity and characteristics are related to our interpersonal communication. The chapter also offers suggestions for improving your intercultural communication competence.

3.1 Culture and Communication

We are often unaware or not fully conscious of how culture influences our behavior and our communication, but it pervades almost every aspect of the lives of people in a society. Culture influences how we dress, how we act, what and when we eat, what and when we celebrate, how

we raise and educate our children, and how we even view life and death. It affects our concepts of time, whether we prefer direct or indirect messages, if we view the world more as an individual or as a member of a group, and many other aspects of life that most people rarely think about. These characteristics of culture, in turn, affect the manner in which we communicate with other people. They influence our perception of the world, our verbal and nonverbal messages, and our relationships. If you desire to be a competent communicator, it is thus imperative that you understand the impact of culture on you, the people you encounter, and the interactions that you share.

What Is Culture?

When you travel to a new country, to a different region in the United States, or even to an event or environment that is unfamiliar to you, you will likely encounter people who speak different languages, wear different clothing, and have different customs from your own. Every society has a **culture**, or a number of different cultures—a relatively specialized set of traditions, beliefs, values, and **norms**, or standards of behavior that have been passed down from generation to generation by way of communication. Culture is often described as "the way we learn to do things." Everyday parts of our lives such as etiquette, values, customs, traditions, language, courtesy, and rituals such as shaking hands when you meet someone are at least partially formed, shaped, and changed by culture.

Culture provides structure in a society by defining the roles of group members and the hierarchy or status of various groups within the culture. In this sense, culture is **normative**, which means that it provides the rules, regulations, and norms that govern society and the manner in which people act with other members of that society. All societies have a system of social organization, and culture serves to provide an ordered and organized system for dealing with people within that society (Novinger, 2001). Culture is learned, but it seems natural because it is such an integral part of life. People are conditioned by culture to fit into a particular society, and the rules for interacting with other people are learned from birth. These rules become hidden, subtle influences on our behavior. You learn when to talk, when to keep quiet, and what tone of voice to use. You are taught which gestures are and are not acceptable. You learn what facial expressions are approved and which will earn a reprimand. You learn to sit up straight, cover your mouth to sneeze, and not to pick your nose (Novinger, 2001).

Steve Raymer/Asia Images/Getty Images

▲ Culture often seems instinctual because it is such an integral part of life, but its rules and norms are learned from birth.

Historically, most societies had a shared culture—a consistent set of cultural traits, norms, and customs among members of that society. Most modern societies,

however, are a mix of different and often competing cultures because we have access to more foreign cultures today than ever before due to the increased rates of migration of people from one region of the world to another, military conquests, personal and professional travel, and global economics. But you do not have to travel abroad today to encounter cultural differences. **Intercultural communication**, which is a significant area of study in the communication discipline, is "the communication process in which individual participants of differing cultural and subcultural backgrounds come into direct contact with one another" (Kim, 2010, p. 454). The United States, for example, is an ethnically diverse nation of immigrants; in 2000 its foreign-born population was estimated at 30 million people, or 11% of the population (National Intelligence Council, 2001). Over America's 230-plus year history, it has become home to people from almost every other culture in the world, which likely explains why the United States is also currently one of the most racially tolerant nations in the world (Berggren & Nilsson, 2013). If you reside and work in the United States, you live in a multicultural environment, and you will regularly come into contact with people in your personal and your professional lives whose cultural backgrounds differ from yours.

We can view the United States as an **open system** culture: a culture that has continuous inputs and outputs from and to the surrounding environment. In other words, American culture is influenced by and can influence elements of other cultures. One example of this is our successful adaptation of British television shows such as *American Idol* and *The Office.* At the same time, who we are as a culture has also spread around the world in the form of movies and television shows. Celebrity international endorsements are also examples of the continued dispersal of American culture—for example, actor Ben Stiller's promotion of Chu-Hi, a Japanese canned alcoholic drink, or former wrestler and reality TV star Hulk Hogan's association with Hitachi air conditioner units.

Societies exert a great deal of pressure on people to conform to the way things are done in that specific culture, but this pressure is often subtle. You may be unaware of it until you do something unacceptable or encounter people from other cultures who do things differently. You may like to think of yourself as your own person, acting of your own free will. Although it is true that you can make choices about how to behave if your actions are not considered acceptable in your society, you usually suffer consequences or endure punishment for not behaving "properly." These consequences can vary. For example, you might be excluded from group parties, if your manners are poor. In a more extreme example, you might be **ostracized** or removed from a group or from society at large if you violate the formally stated laws of the land.

In summary, you could think of culture as a picture frame that surrounds and creates a border for your behavior and your communication. You are, in a sense, bound by your culture because the words in your language, your vocal characteristics, your nonverbal communication, and environmental influences can only be decoded correctly if someone is familiar with the cultural context. If you are not knowledgeable about a culture, you will often misread cues.

Dominant Cultures and Co-Cultures

Cultural diversity can enrich a society by infusing it with new ideas, new perspectives, and new ways of doing things. However, this diversity can also cause social unrest and conflict. As you learned in Chapter 1, belonging is a basic human need, and as we discussed in Chapter 2, self-image and self-esteem are equally strong needs. Immigrants to a new culture must often make difficult choices about whether to retain their cultural heritage, primarily adopt the behavior

patterns of the dominant culture, or attempt to blend these different cultural characteristics in some way. The dominant culture, however, can also change when new populations are large and become significant subcultures, or co-cultures, within the society. The next sections will define and address these different aspects of culture.

Dominant Cultures

Although many societies are multicultural, they generally have a **dominant culture**—a term used by sociologists, anthropologists, and researchers in cultural studies to describe the established language, religion, behavior, values, rituals, and social customs of a particular society. The dominant culture may or may not represent the majority of the population; instead, it is considered to be dominant because it controls or has influence over social institutions such as the media, educational institutions, law, political processes, business, and artistic expression (Marshall, 1998). This power and control is not absolute, nor is it permanent: Other groups within the society may challenge the dominant culture. For example, because people from England, Ireland, and Scotland predominantly settled the original 13 colonies in the United States, many aspects of U.S. culture were based on British culture, which was itself a mix of English and other European traditions. As a result, the English language as well as the American legal and political system and many customs, religious views, attitudes toward work, recreational pastimes, and other characteristics of Anglo (English) culture became dominant in the United States (Mio, Trimble, & Arredondo, 1999).

When individuals are born into a particular society, they begin a process of **enculturation**, when they learn and adopt the norms, traditions, and beliefs of their dominant culture. Individuals are immersed in their dominant culture, and they acquire knowledge about that culture via direct experience. For example, they will eat food that is preferred by members of that culture, learn the primary language, and view and experience the major forms of media popular within that culture. Even immigrants usually undergo a period of **acculturation**, during which they learn and begin to adopt the norms of the dominant culture and the behaviors that are acceptable or preferred in the new society. Acculturation, for example, involves observing others who are members of the dominant culture to see how they behave, communicate, and what their preferences and dislikes are. From these observations, and by directly interacting with the newly adopted culture, the individual will begin to take on characteristics of that culture.

The acculturation process is not just one-way—as more and more new members join a culture, their values and beliefs will shape and influence the dominant culture as well. A society may celebrate its multicultural makeup, but its most widely shared customs, holidays, and traditions are usually those of the dominant culture, such as the U.S. holidays of Thanksgiving and Independence Day. The dominant culture of a society can change, but, unless a revolution or other major social upheaval occurs, this change usually happens slowly, over a lengthy period of time.

Table 3.1 illustrates some aspects of U.S. culture that can be troublesome for newcomers, but are likely to go unnoticed by most members of the dominant culture. These "Facts about American Lifestyle and Culture" were provided by the website www.path2usa.com to help visitors and immigrants understand and become familiar with various aspects of the dominant U.S. culture. Review the suggestions and consider whether the recommendations would be helpful for someone who is new to the United States. Do you think the recommendations are all appropriate advice for those new to the United States? Would you alter any of these suggestions or include additional suggestions?

Table 3.1: Practical tips for visitors to the United States

Aspects of U.S. Culture Often Unfamiliar to Visitors or Newcomers
In America one has to keep to the right hand side of the road, and the driver's seat is on the left side of the car.
If a cop (police officer) asks you to stop while you are driving, just stop the car at the right side of the road and wait inside. Never get out of the car. The cop may consider it an offense.
You will find both "Hot" and "Cold" water in the tap at all places like your apartment, office, and public restrooms.
At restaurants, you won't get finger bowls. One can use paper napkins.
Electric switches are operated in the opposite direction, i.e., upside-ON and downside-OFF. Generally, there is no ON-OFF switch next to every plug point. They are always ON. Just connect the plug whenever necessary.
The TV channels can't be tuned according to your wish. For example, ESPN will come on channel 39; you can't change it. This is applied according to your area and the cable company.
At work or elsewhere while talking, if you want to say yes, just say "YES." Don't nod your head up and down. Moving your head side to side is very confusing, and it's mostly taken as NO.
Never, ever talk in your native language in the presence of Americans during a gathering.
When standing in a line, make sure there is enough space between you and the person standing in front of you. If you stand too close to strangers, they feel you are invading their personal space.
FREE is a buzzword here. You may get hundreds of ads with FREE in bigger fonts. Make sure that you read and understand all terms and conditions. Look for any hidden costs (Generally referred as the Catch) before accepting such offers. Note: Generally, the Catch is written in almost unreadable font size.
Don't be surprised if complete strangers greet you. Be polite and greet them back. Generally, Americans are very polite, friendly, and helpful, but have little patience with interference in their private lives.
Don't offer chewing gum or a breath freshener to others. It gives them a message that they have a bad breath. Your intention may not be that, but it is easily mistaken.

Source: "Facts about American Lifestyle and Culture." http://www.path2usa.com/facts-about-usa. Used with permission of www.Path2usa.com

Co-Cultures

In addition to a dominant culture, most societies have several **co-cultures**—regional, economic, social, religious, or ethnic groups that are not the dominant culture but still do exert influence in the society. These co-cultures have characteristic customs and patterns of behavior that are unique to them and that distinguish them from the dominant culture. The terms *co-culture* and *subculture* have similar meaning, but *co-culture* implies that multiple cultures can exist together in the same geographic space, whereas *subculture* could imply that some cultures are necessarily subsumed into, or are inferior to, other cultures. The term *co-culture* emphasizes that, even though we can identify with a dominant culture, there may be another culture with which you identify more closely and feel best represents who you are and how you behave. For example, you might identify yourself as an American, but have a particular co-culture, such as a religious affiliation, geographic region, or occupation that you also strongly identify with and that is an important component of who you are.

There are various U.S. geographic co-cultures that developed because different ethnic groups or nationalities immigrated to specific regions of the United States. These regional co-cultures each have their own customs and traditions, dialects of the English language, and foods. Regional cuisines, from cheesesteaks and water ice in Philadelphia to green chile stew in New Mexico, grits and sweet tea in the South, and sushi in the West are examples of the influence of different cultural groups in parts of the United States (United States of America, 2010). Customs, traditions, and foods once unique to certain co-cultures also can become part of the dominant culture over time.

The holiday of Cinco de Mayo, May 5th, for instance, commemorates the victory of the Mexican militia over the French army at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. The holiday is widely celebrated in the United States (though it is not celebrated in Mexico), especially in cities that have a significant Mexican population, and Mexican food is popular throughout the year in the United States.

Co-cultures also develop in groups other than those who share ethnic backgrounds. You are likely a member of any number of co-cultures, based in part on your gender, religion, political and social beliefs, occupation, school affiliation, athletic team preferences, and hobbies or interests. For example, attending San Diego Comic-Con, the annual convention that celebrates comic books and related aspects of science fiction, fantasy, and popular culture, can make someone who is not a part of the co-culture feel as if he is in a foreign country. There are characters, outfits, customs, phrases, and objects at Comic-Con that you might not understand if you are not a member of the comic book co-culture. Though the comic book co-culture seems like a small co-culture within the dominant U.S. culture, it has actually influenced, and is influenced by, multiple cultures in a meaningful way. Comic book superheroes are now a driving force behind several blockbuster movies. The Avengers, for example, is a multi-movie franchise based on characters and storylines originally developed in Marvel comics. Indeed, one researcher argues that superheroes often represent an ideal American identity and contribute to the narrative of "good American citizenship" (Wanzo, 2009, p. 93).

Another example of a co-culture's potential influence is the proliferation of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month (NBACM), held in October of each year. Originally a health campaign started in 1985 by the American Cancer Society and a pharmaceutical company, breast cancer advocates and survivors emerged as members of an influential co-culture that gradually shifted the dominant culture's focus to fundraising and research on this specific form of cancer. The pink ribbon that symbolizes breast cancer awareness became an important marketing tool for showing support for fighting this disease, and for women in general. Eventually, companies such as Estée Lauder, national magazines such as *Self*, and major organizations such as the National Football League became involved in the event. In October 2013, the White House went pink for breast cancer awareness. This shift from small-scale campaign to nationwide co-culture illustrates the significant effects co-cultures can have on the dominant culture.

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▲ Some co-cultures develop in groups with shared hobbies or interests. Similar to other co-cultures, such groups have unique customs and patterns of behavior.

But some co-cultures have customs and behaviors that are dramatically different from those of the dominant culture; sometimes they are criticized or forbidden if they veer too far afield from conventional norms. For example, organized gangs are prolific in many urban areas in America and often engage in illegal, destructive activities. To combat the influence of gang co-culture, cities may adopt laws prohibiting graffiti, or "tagging," or schools may adopt dress codes that prohibit the wearing of gang colors.

In addition, one of the responsibilities of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is to ensure that individuals or groups do not behave in an obscene manner on television. When TV broadcasts do include content that is classified by the FCC as obscene, profane, or indecent, the FCC has the legal authority to levy a fine or even revoke a television station's license. The threat of such punishments prompts many stations (especially those that air live broadcasts with potentially controversial material, such as MTV's Video Music Awards) to use a 5- or 10-second delay. This short delay will allow the station to censor itself before profanity or nudity is broadcast to viewers. The dominant culture of a society, then, can exert a great deal of pressure on those co-cultures it perceives as being troublesome or possibly deviant, so much so that the co-culture may begin to self-regulate to prevent punishment from the dominant culture.

Culture and Media

Communication scholars agree that the media, including social media and emerging technology, is not only a primary tool for information transmission but is also a reflection of culture (e.g., Bybee, 2008). Today, due to its growing and ever-changing nature, media are more central to and interdependent with culture than ever before. Culture and the media are interrelated in three ways:

- Media can provide a range of details about the issues that matter to a specific society.
- Media can reflect dominant cultures and co-cultures.
- Media can help individuals learn about their cultures and others' cultures.

First, we learn about our own culture's politics, social issues, health information, popular movies, television shows, websites, and products and services via the media. As media consumers, we are discerning about which form of media we prefer as sources of information for particular cultural issues. For example, U.S. adults' preferred source of information about the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (also known as healthcare reform) was magazine articles, whereas interpersonal information from sources such as friends and family members was viewed as less satisfying and more difficult to obtain (Bevan, Sparks, Ernst, Francies, & Santora, 2013). Second, though the dominant culture, by definition, has the greatest control and influence over the media (consider the FCC example discussed in the previous section), aspects of any number of co-cultures can also be portrayed in the media. For example, many residents of southern states were upset about how their co-culture was being depicted on television programs such as MTV's *Buckwild* (now canceled) and TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Third, media globalization means that individuals can use various forms of media to learn about and adapt to different cultures (e.g., Croucher, 2011). The 35% growth in international box office profits from 2006 to 2011 is an example of how U.S. pop culture is growing in size and influence worldwide (Motion Picture Association of America, 2011).

Social media also uniquely transmit and reflect culture. Individuals can use social media sites to communicate with other members of their culture, interact with their dominant culture, and learn about and acculturate to new cultures (Croucher, 2011). For example, some researchers (Johnson, Tudor, & Nuseibeh, 2013) argue that Twitter is a useful form of social media for engaging in political protest for five reasons; Twitter is

1. Quick, providing real-time information in 140 characters or less
2. Free
3. Personal

4. Highly mobile and resistant to government control
5. Capable of providing users with anonymity (p. 129)

Indeed, Ginger Johnson and her colleagues (2013) conclude from their findings that Twitter was an important platform and tool that protesters used when organizing and executing the Egyptian revolution in 2011.

A dominant culture can also strategically use social media to shape its identity; one example of this is the country of Turkey, which utilizes Twitter to communicate its national identity and exercise its cultural influence to followers (Uysal, Schroeder, & Taylor, 2012). Similarly, the White House (@whitehouse), and President Barack Obama (@barackobama) each have their own Twitter accounts, and the tweets signed "- bo" are directly posted by the president. Whether we use social media or other platforms, the media provide access to information and tools that we can use to learn about and participate in our culture and others' cultures. (See *IPC in the Digital Age* to read about the impact of using social media while studying abroad.)

IPC IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Does Use of Social Media While Studying Abroad Impact Adjustment?

Many high school and university students experience another culture in depth when they study abroad or take part in a foreign exchange program. Students gain a greater insight into a particular culture through such programs, but it can also be a stressful and lonely experience, especially as students first arrive and learn to adjust to their new surroundings. One study (Lee, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012) examined how social media can be used while studying abroad and the impact this use had on students' cultural adjustment. This study focused on 15 Malaysian students' experiences with social media while studying abroad. Specifically, the researchers analyzed students' status updates on Facebook while they were studying in North America and also considered their Facebook friends' responses. They focused on status updates because such updates are an example of a relatively unstructured online interaction, which means there is not an established format but an unspoken procedure that determines how, when, or what information should be posted. The researchers call status updates "the digital equivalence of a short conversation between friends" (Lee et al., 2012, p. 63). In addition, status updates are archived and thus easily retrieved: 917 status updates were collected from the 15 students and then examined for consistent themes. The student participants were interviewed before and after their study abroad experience and also completed a survey approximately 18 months after they had returned home.

The study findings first revealed that students used their Facebook status updates to cope with the stress of studying abroad, to provide information about their experiences in a new culture, and even to engage in social comparisons with other study abroad participants. The students' Facebook friends offered positive social support in response to the status updates that described negative emotions. Friends also offered humor, encouragement, and motivation when the students' updates indicated that they were having a difficult time. The study abroad students were also able to describe their experiences in the new cultures, thus allowing them to explore their new cultural identities while also maintaining ties with their old culture via connections with Facebook friends. The researchers concluded that Facebook was a useful psychological adjustment tool for study abroad students (Lee et al., 2012).

(continued)

Apply these findings to your own experiences. Even if you haven't studied abroad, if you traveled to a new culture, think about how much you used social media while you were there and how your social media use may have influenced how well you adjusted to your surroundings. Now consider the critical thinking questions provided.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. If you have spent time traveling in another country, what types of social media did you prefer to use and why?
2. To what extent do you think that your use of social media to stay connected impacted how you adjusted to your new culture?
3. Could you use social media too much to stay connected with home and thus not experience as much of your new culture?

3.2 Cultural Identity and Communication

As we have seen thus far in this chapter, cultures and co-cultures serve important functions in maintaining a society and establishing norms and practices for its members. These practices may represent important events in the society's history and can provide a sense of communal pride, bringing people together with shared values, symbols, holidays, and traditions. Culture also helps create a perspective, or worldview, that influences how its members think about the world, themselves, and other people. Your dominant culture is so pervasive in your life that it influences your communication in significant ways. Culture gives you a sense of identity (Novinger, 2001).

Identity is a consistent set of attitudes that defines who you are and shapes how you view and describe yourself. It is your subjective self-image, what you tell yourself, and what psychologists sometimes refer to as a self-schema (Johnson, 1986). For example, a person responding to the "Who am I?" activity from Chapter 2 might describe herself as an American, a southerner, an African American, a Baptist, a mother, a sister, a Girl Scout leader, and a New Orleans Saints fan. Each of these groups in which she claims membership tells others something about how she sees herself, how she defines her racial and ethnic heritage, what she believes and values, and what interests her.

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▲ Identity can influence how we communicate with others, but our interactions with others can also influence our identities.

Primary and Secondary Identities

Your identity can include both a primary and secondary identity. **Primary identity** encompasses consistent aspects of your identity, including your biological sex, race or ethnicity, nationality, religion, and age. In other words, an individual's primary identity rarely changes because it is difficult to permanently alter it. As we saw in the beginning of the chapter, the different aspects of one's primary identity can significantly influence how he or she communicates—the first officers described by

Malcolm Gladwell were so swayed by their primary ethnic identities that they chose indirect messages even in emergency situations. We can, however, choose to ignore or downplay certain parts of our primary identities. For example, you may be a member of a particular religion, but you choose not to attend its services or follow its customs. People can also ignore their age limitations; Fauja Singh, for example, ran marathons until the age of 101 (BBC News, 2013)! In this way, we do not need to be defined by all aspects of our primary identities.

A **secondary identity** includes the more malleable roles and characteristics of your identity, such as your socioeconomic status, occupation, or relationship status. Your secondary identity can be just as important or central as any aspect of your primary identity but is more likely to change over time. For example, as you move up the ladder in your career, your job title and responsibilities will change, and this will alter part of your secondary identity. Shifting from full-time student to full-time employee, or vice versa, will also alter part of your secondary identity. But some secondary identities can be dangerous, especially when considered a significant part of one's identity. An individual who strongly identifies himself as a smoker, for example, is less likely to consider quitting and may find it more difficult to stop even if he tries (Harwood & Sparks, 2003). This strong identification with smoking thus might also increase his odds of developing smoking-related health issues.

Though primary and secondary identities differ, everybody has both a primary and secondary identity, and no two sets of identities are alike. The identities of individuals in an interaction can sometimes clash. In one study that explored the communication between grandchildren and their grandparents, young adulthood and old age are times when one's primary identity is particularly salient (Kam & Hecht, 2009). Specifically, young adults are negotiating their identities, and older adults who are grandparents view that particular relational identity as being particularly central to them. Jennifer Kam and Michael Hecht (2009) found that the presence of **identity gaps**, or discrepancies between the authentic self and the self that you believe another person finds more appealing, between young adult grandchildren and their grandparents was related to decreased satisfaction with the relationship and the interaction. Our interactions with others can thus shape and shift both our primary and secondary identities because communication can alter how we see ourselves and those roles or groups with which we most closely identify.

Membership, Interests, and Cultural Identities

Who you are not only includes your primary and secondary identities, but also what you enjoy doing and the important groups with which you seek to align yourself. Culture often has a hand in shaping which groups and interests are important. For example, the television show *Friday Night Lights* depicted high school football as an integral activity in Texas, with towns rallying around, and individuals strongly identifying with, their towns' teams and players. On the show, football players' families proudly displayed team signs in their front yards; wealthy and influential boosters provided the team financial support and perks, such as a Jumbotron screen; and most of the businesses in town closed down during games. A male growing up in this culture may want (or at least feel pressured) to be a member of this group to reap the many benefits of its membership, including elevated status in this particular culture. The reverse can also be true: An individual may shy away from a group or interest because it is negatively perceived by a culture. The same male may not want to be characterized as a "band geek," for example, and decide not to join the marching band, even though he loves playing a musical instrument.

How you choose to describe yourself enables you to highlight what you think is important about you, and this can include your memberships and interests as well as your primary and secondary

identities. But your identity can also cause others to create a stereotype about you before they get to know you. **Stereotypes** are fixed opinions or preconceptions about someone based on perceived characteristics or expectations of a group rather than factual information about the specific person. In other words, stereotypes are exaggerated perceptions of similarities or differences among people. People in certain groups have some shared experiences, so some stereotypes might contain a grain of truth. To some degree, we need certain stereotypes to cognitively organize all of the information we can receive at any given time via our senses. However, stereotypes become problematic when they cause us to look at all members of a group as similar and to ignore the unique differences among individuals. It is best never to rely only on stereotypes when making judgments or forming an opinion because many stereotypes are negative judgments or are based on ignorance or misinformation about a culture and its members.

Try the following exercise: Picture someone named Garcia. Now picture someone named Claire. What do these two people look like? The people you pictured are based on your stereotypes of what those names signify. Would you be surprised if Garcia was a 5-year-old girl with blond hair and Claire was a 66-year-old man? Table 3.2 contains some stereotypes about U.S. culture and some common American interpretations. In your interactions with other people, have you encountered any of these stereotypes, or other stereotypes based on your cultural heritage, memberships, and interests?

Table 3.2: Stereotypes of American culture and common American interpretations

Stereotype of American Culture	Common American Interpretation
Americans are self-centered and uncaring or disinterested in others because they rarely ask them personal questions.	It is rude to ask personal questions of people such as their age or how much money they make.
Americans are insincere; they are always smiling and are unrelentingly enthusiastic.	Americans are optimistic, and it is polite to appear happy, even when they are not.
Americans are loud, crass, and effusive. They assertively introduce themselves to others.	Americans value being sociable and friendly.
Americans maintain a large physical distance from one another compared to many other cultures, and yawning, passing gas, and openly breast-feeding are frowned on.	Americans express bodily restraint to avoid offending others by standing too close, touching others, or engaging in behaviors that may make others uncomfortable.
Americans are competitive, and, unlike soccer, American football games can never end in a tie. Football also reflects cultural ideals about sex and gender; the attire of players and cheerleaders exaggerates male and female sex characteristics.	Americans connect with one another through sports. Football expresses an important American value of competition. The attire of football players is primarily for protection from injury rather than to exaggerate male characteristics. However, Americans admit to accenting female sexual characteristics with cheerleader outfits.
The word *American* conjures up an image of a white, middle-class person. All other residents, including the area's indigenous inhabitants, are hyphenated or identified with an adjective: Native American, African-American, Asian-American, Mexican-American. The national census does not hyphenate Americans of European descent.	Hyphenation of names is commonly the preference of the group itself and distinguishes their cultural heritage.

Americans have food rituals to accompany many occasions. Waking up is accompanied by coffee. Social occasions usually include alcohol. Hot dogs and beer are served at sporting events, and popcorn and candy are consumed at movie theaters.	Americans do associate certain foods with certain occasions. However, no pressure is put on people to conform; people are free to avoid eating on these occasions or to substitute other foods and beverages.
Americans celebrate several national holidays, but they are regarded more as family holidays than as celebrations of patriotism. The Fourth of July marks the Declaration of Independence from Britain in 1776, but it is also a time for summer picnics and camping trips for friends and family. Thanksgiving is an annual feast that celebrates the hardships of early colonists, and, according to legend, the American Indians who came to their aid, sharing indigenous foods such as maize and turkey. However, Thanksgiving is important not primarily because of its symbolism but because it is a significant family holiday, and one of the few large and elaborate meals that families prepare.	Many Americans consider national holidays to be times in which families come together. However, they like to think that they celebrate both the family fellowship and the significance of the holiday itself. Americans have a proud military tradition, and flying the American flag, for example, is common on the Fourth of July to celebrate the country's independence. Giving thanks for their blessings around the table before the Thanksgiving dinner is traditional among many American families to show gratitude for the occasion, the food, and the family.
Americans are generally not opposed to social benefits such as pensions, Social Security, and insurance of bank deposits. However, relief programs for the poor, known as welfare, are controversial. In a country where many believe that all its citizens have an equal chance, where opportunity is unlimited, and where only the lazy are poor, programs for the indigent have been vulnerable to cutbacks.	Americans generally believe in providing a safety net for those in the society who are unable to help themselves. However, they also strongly value self-reliance and believe that people have a personal responsibility to care for themselves and their families if they are able to do so. The conflict between these two values is a major political issue in the United States.
Americans have an uncomfortable relationship with their own mortality. Although most residents are Christian, the value placed on youth, vigor, and worldly goods is so great that death is considered a sad and solemn occasion. It is difficult for Americans to talk about, and at funerals it is customary to wear black and to speak in hushed tones. Graveyards are solemn and quiet places.	Americans often have difficulty accepting the inevitability of death. However, they believe that this problem stems more from their enjoyment of life rather than the placement of value on youth or worldly goods. While it is true that Americans admire youth and vigor, they also care for their elders and value them as important family members.

Source: Adapted from United States of America. (2010). *Countries and their cultures: Culture of United States of America.* www.everyculture.com

Communication Accommodation Theory

A number of communication theories can help us understand and improve how individuals from different groups or cultures interact with one another. The most significant of these theories is **communication accommodation theory (CAT)**, developed 40 years ago by communication studies scholar Howard Giles. CAT aims to provide possible explanations for how and why people adapt their communications with those who are different from them and the social and cultural outcomes of such adaptations (McGlone & Giles, 2011). Specifically, CAT describes how communicators from different social groups or cultures choose to modify or adapt their nonverbal and verbal messages to accommodate, or adjust to, one another (Shepard, Giles, & LePoire, 2001).

According to CAT, **convergence** occurs when we alter our messages towards those used by other communicators in an interaction. For example, we might speak at the same rate, use a similar tone or accent, or self-disclose similar levels of information. Convergence is more likely when individuals seek to be like the person they are interacting with, and it is usually perceived as a

positive communication strategy. However, there is also a risk of **overaccommodation** when a communicator goes beyond what is necessary to mitigate differences between communicators, and such accommodations might be perceived as insincere, offensive, or condescending (Sparks, Bevan, & Rogers, 2012). Speaking slowly and loudly to someone from a different culture is one example of overaccommodation, especially if a language difference, not an auditory impairment, is the true barrier to shared meaning.

We can also exercise communication **divergence** if we shift our verbal and nonverbal communication away from other communicators in an interaction. Divergent messages emphasize social distance from others and whether or not one is a member of a particular group. Using divergent communication is often negatively perceived and is considered a signal that the communicator dislikes or is uninterested in the interaction (Sparks et al., 2012). An example of cultural divergence is refusing to learn the language or customs of a foreign country, where you are a visitor, and instead behaving as if yours is the dominant culture.

How can CAT help you improve your intercultural communication? First, it is important to consider altering or accommodating your communication when you interact with members of other cultures or co-cultures. Trying to encode convergent messages when you interact with others will increase communication competence. But be careful not to overaccommodate because then your messages could be perceived as an insult, imitation, or overzealous attempt to gain acceptance. Instead, let the conversation naturally flow. At the same time, monitor the other communicator's responses to your messages and be mindful of how the person adjusts his or her messages.

3.3 Cultural Membership and Interpersonal Communication

In his classic book *The Silent Language*, anthropologist Edward T. Hall states, "culture is communication and communication is culture," suggesting that culture and communication necessarily go hand in hand (1959, p.186). In his view, culture governs our communication, and communication creates and reinforces culture by transmitting it through language and nonverbal communication. Your culture is the framework that tells you what is important to attend to, how to organize what you see, and how to interpret it. For example, suppose that someone in a room holds up an index finger. If you are from the United States, you may or may not notice the gesture. However, if the person were, instead, to hold up the middle finger of his or her hand, it would probably get your attention. This second gesture communicates a specific shared message to members of American culture, and if you are familiar with that culture you would quickly make sense of and interpret the gesture based on cultural norms.

Both verbal and nonverbal messages reflect your social background and heritage, as well as the experiences, beliefs, values, attitudes, and role expectations supplied by your dominant culture and the co-cultures that are important to your identity. The language that you learn and use in your everyday communication with others is culturally bound, as are the nonverbal communication that you use or do not use. For example, though Americans and British both speak English, certain words have different meanings depending on these specific cultures—elevator versus lift, or chips versus crisps, for example. Americans also frequently make direct eye contact with their conversational partners, whereas members of a number of Asian cultures shy away from direct eye contact, believing that eye contact is disrespectful.

When you come into contact with people from other cultures, you cannot assume they will encode and decode messages the same way you do. Indeed, the cultural, social, and historical context in which the message occurs must be considered to increase the likelihood that meaning will be shared (Hall, 1976). You can certainly encounter communication difficulties with people from your own culture, but the incidence of such problems increases when you interact with people from entirely different cultures. In the personal, professional, and mediated arenas, cultural differences can cause communication difficulties, as can different languages and different interpretations of nonverbal messages. Some of these potential communication challenges are discussed next.

XiXinXing/Thinkstock

▲ Both verbal and nonverbal messages can reflect one's social background and heritage.

Low-Context and High-Context Cultures

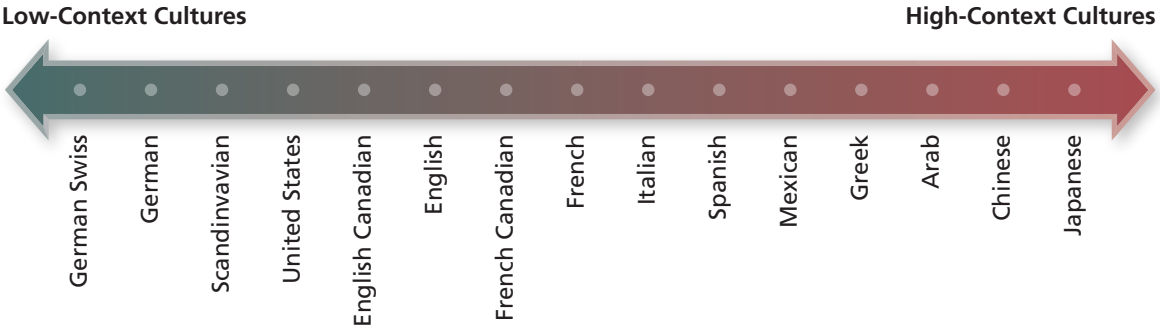
All cultures incorporate both verbal and nonverbal elements into their communication. However, some cultures depend more on words, while other cultures rely more on nonverbal elements such as body language, factors in the environment, or the communication situation itself. One way to understand these communication differences, introduced by Edward Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*, is to determine a culture's context. *Context*, according to Hall (1976), is a function of culture that "designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore" (p. 85). Context, in relation to communication, is a cultural factor that determines the degree to which the intention or meaning of communication is explicit or implicit. A particular culture, as it relates to Hall's conceptualization, can thus be placed along the continuum ranging from low context to high context.

The meaning of messages in a **low-context culture** tends to be clear, direct, and is typically derived from words. The United States, for example, is a low-context culture. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the words someone uses when they speak, and in U.S. culture phrases such as "I give you my word" and "My word is my bond" reflect the value placed on people's words. A great deal of significance is also placed on explicit, written messages, including formal contracts, meeting agendas, and even course syllabi, to provide necessary information and details. Nonverbal messages such as silence, eye contact, or gestures are generally used to reinforce words. A **high-context culture**, however, emphasizes the implicit and indirect meaning of messages, and thus communicators rely more on nonverbal elements. For example, in some high-context cultures a raised eyebrow might mean "yes," as in France and Polynesia, or it might mean "no," as in Greece (Novinger, 2001). Words are not as important as the way they are said, or the context in which the communication takes place, so members of high-context cultures are better at "reading between the lines." Much of the important information in a high-context message is contained in the nonverbal elements, in a ritualized response, or in the context of the communication.

To help illustrate differences between high- and low-context cultures, consider how individuals might engage in conflict with one another. Stephen Croucher and his colleagues (2012) found that members of the high-context cultures of India and Thailand would either avoid conflict or give in during conflict, whereas members of U.S. and Ireland low-context cultures would be direct and dominating during a conflict. But it is important to note that cultures do not rank as "low" or "high" in an absolute sense. Instead, such distinctions occur on a continuum, or scale, from lower to higher (see Figure 3.1). Greek culture, for example, may depend more on context in a communication (higher on the continuum) than the English culture but depend less on context (lower on the continuum) than Japanese or Chinese. It is also important to remember that people within a particular culture may be extremely diverse and that various co-cultures exist within each dominant culture. For example, even though someone may be from a low-context culture such as the United States, that person's central co-culture could be higher context than the dominant U.S. culture.

Figure 3.1: A continuum of low- to high-context cultures

The different explicit and implicit meanings of communication are affected by certain cultural factors. Messages tend to be more direct in low-context cultures and more indirect in high-context cultures.



Source: Copeland, L., & Griggs, L. (1985). *Going international: How to make friends and deal effectively in the global marketplace.* ©1985 Lennie Copeland and Lewis Griggs. Used by permission of Griggs Productions. For more information please visit http://www.griggs.com/

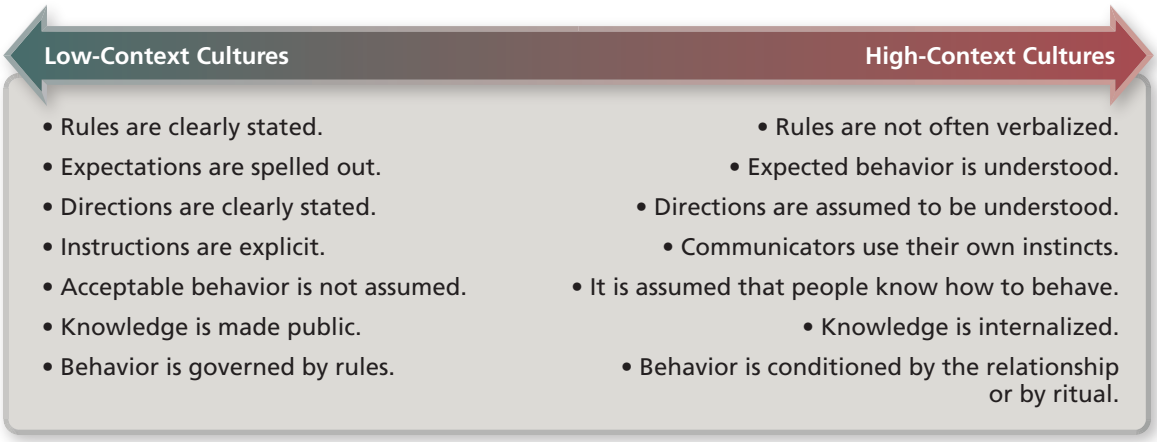
Low- and high-context categorizations do not apply to all people in a specific country, but it is important to understand the general tendencies of the dominant culture because this knowledge can help you communicate better with those from cultures different from your own (Copeland & Griggs, 1985). Every culture is unique, and when you interact or do business with people from other cultures, you must become familiar not only with the language of the other country but also with its culture. In some high-context cultures, for example, it is considered rude to directly say "no" if someone makes a request of you, and people instead prefer to communicate the "no" without actually saying the words. They might say, "maybe" or "I will try," but it is clearly understood to mean "no" to someone who is familiar with that culture. The "maybe" or "I will try" answers are simply ritualized responses, much like when we ask someone "How are you?" and they respond "fine" (even when they are not).

People from low-context cultures such as the United States are used to focusing on being precise and using verbal communication. So, when an American makes a request of a person from a higher-context society who responds with an indirect, ambiguous message such as "I will try," the American will typically ignore the ritual and the context, take the words literally, and expect the person to try to accommodate the request. Then the American may become upset when the other

person makes no attempt to do so. If the American protests, the high-context person may have difficulty understanding and believe the American is trying to force a rude response (Novinger, 2001). When engaging in an intercultural communication, you may have a tendency to be **ethnocentric**, that is, to believe that your own culture or method of communication is best or does things "the right way" and that others are wrong. One of the most important skills of competent communicators in this multicultural and globalized world is to recognize that cultures are not right or wrong; they are merely different from one another. Figure 3.2 summarizes the different characteristics of communication in low-context and high-context cultures.

Figure 3.2: Communication in low-context and high-context cultures

Every culture is unique, but there are some general factors that we can keep in mind when we interact with individuals from high-context and low-context cultures.



Source: Based on information from Novinger, T. (2001). *Intercultural communication: A practical guide.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

In addition to differences between low- and high-context communication in cultures, another fundamental way in which cultures differ is their tendency toward individualism or collectivism. In **individualistic cultures**, there is a tendency to focus on individual rights, identity, and achievements. The United States, for example, is an individualistic culture. Americans generally value a strong sense of personal identity and promote individual goals, rights, choices, and freedoms. People in the United States, as well as in other individualistic cultures such as Australia and the Netherlands, are encouraged to be unique and self-reliant. They are generally stimulated by individual competition, place personal goals over others' motivations, and often attribute their achievements to their individual strengths. In an individualistic culture, meeting new people often involves questions about accomplishments such as "What do you do for a living?" Many believe that they create their own identity, and they are proud of their personal success.

Members of **collectivistic cultures**, however, focus more on group obligations, identity, and concerns. Collectivistic cultures such as China, Costa Rica, and Indonesia tend to value a strong sense of group identity and promote group goals and values. Such cultures also value close ties, cooperation and harmony, conforming to the group, and relying on others for support. The group, family, or community a person belongs to is of high importance in the culture, and people are more interdependent and closely associated with their social network that includes their family, coworkers, and fellow group members. What is best for the group is the overriding factor in

decision making. In Japanese business situations, for instance, decisions are made within the group, with little or no personal recognition for individuals (Morrison & Conaway, 2006).

One significant difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures is how members of the cultures save face. The term **face** refers to the standing or position a person has in the eyes of others, or "an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction" (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 600). When we attempt to "save face," we strive to maintain a positive position in the eyes of other people with whom we communicate or to respect the position of others. When we "lose face," we are embarrassed or humiliated, and we believe that our position in the eyes of others is diminished.

The concept of face appears in most cultures, but it manifests itself in different ways. Intercultural communication researchers John Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey (2003) have studied face in relation to culture and found that those in collectivistic cultures place more emphasis on the face of others. In an individualistic culture, face is often the source of one's personal pride or self-respect, and saving face is a personal goal. It is one reason why one may make excuses, rationalize, laugh, or excuse her behavior rather than admit she is wrong. For example, the first officers discussed in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* likely were swayed by their perspectives about face, meaning that they chose not to threaten the captain's or air traffic controller's face when they made a request or offered a suggestion, even when lives were at stake. But U.S. air traffic controllers were more interested in accomplishing tasks rather than saving face, which the first officers could have viewed as a threat to their own face.

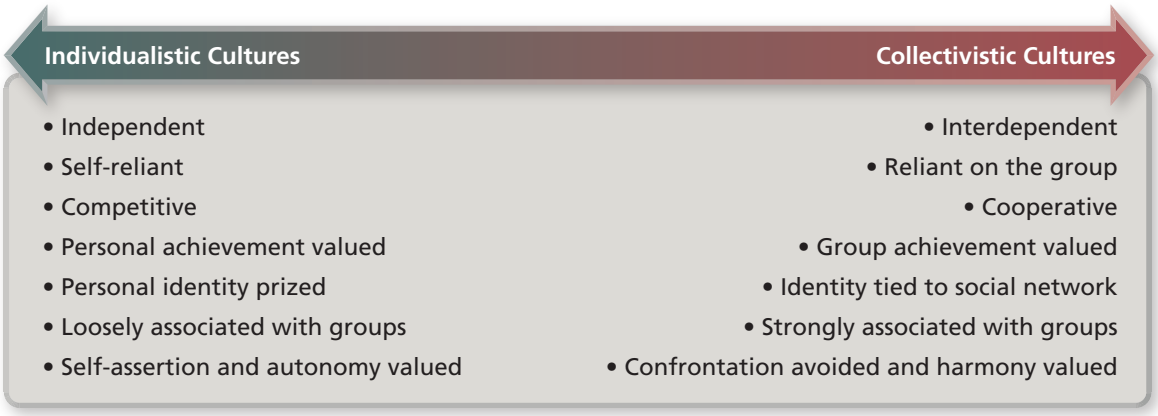
In a collectivistic culture, face influences a person's status in the social group or in society as a whole, and people feel an obligation not only to save face themselves but also to help others save face and not to bring shame on their group (FitzGerald, 2003). In China's collectivistic culture, for instance, the Chinese word for "politeness" includes four components: respectfulness, modesty, a warm attitude, and meeting standards. In this culture saving face means first respecting others by showing appreciation and admiration for them. Second, one must be modest, which is demonstrated by not calling attention to oneself or elevating oneself. Third, an attitude of warmth requires that people show consideration, kindness, and hospitality to others. Finally, one must behave in ways that are appropriate and that meet society's standards. To meet these goals in conversation, Chinese people often present themselves in a modest or self-deprecating way and will avoid saying what they actually think if it might hurt others (Cheng, 2004).

Like low-context and high-context communication characteristics, the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures are not absolute but exist on a continuum. There are elements of individualism and collectivism in all cultures, but to greater or lesser degrees. For example, Germany is classified as a moderately individualistic culture, whereas Japan is moderately collectivistic (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Nearly three fourths of the world's cultures can be described as collectivistic (Triandis, 1989). (Read *Everyday Communication Challenges* to get a further view of the issues involved when e-mailing in different cultures.)

Based on what we have discussed about the differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures, you probably understand how conflicts can occur when people interact closely with others who have different values on issues such as what is best for the group versus what is best for the individual, being unique versus fitting in, and self-reliance versus cooperation. If you want to be a competent communicator when interacting with individuals from other cultures, you must strive to understand the social norms of people from other cultural backgrounds. Figure 3.3 summarizes some differences in the characteristics of individualistic and collectivistic cultures that can influence communication between people in these two types of cultures.

Figure 3.3: Communication in individualistic versus collectivistic cultures

Similar to context, a culture can have a tendency toward individualism or collectivism. There are elements of both in all cultures, but to greater or lesser degrees.



Source: Based on information from Novinger, T. (2001). *Intercultural communication: A practical guide.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

"Reply-All" and Individual Correction: To Send or Not to Send?

Have you ever received an e-mail that contained a mistake? If it was a significant mistake such as the time or location of an upcoming and important meeting, it may need to be fixed. You might feel that it is helpful to inform the person who sent the message so that she doesn't get embarrassed or miss an opportunity. However, what if the message was sent to a large group of people? You'll need to decide if you should point out the mistake to that one person or to the group as a whole. Or, what if the mistake isn't that important, like a simple misspelling? Is it important to fix every mistake that you find, or should you correct it to the group on their behalf?

Regardless of what type of culture you come from, you probably don't like being embarrassed. Depending on the sender's culture, it may cause more problems if you try to correct the e-mail than if you simply let the mistake go. In highly individualistic cultures like the United States, it's probably wise to directly contact only the sender so that she doesn't make the same mistake again, since self-respect is often tied so closely to performance and individual ability. The sender may want to acknowledge the mistake herself. However, in a collectivistic culture, like those found throughout Asia, everyone works to help others in their group "save face." In that situation, you probably shouldn't point out an unimportant mistake, as long as that sender's mistake isn't going to create future problems. Instead, by remaining silent on the matter (and by other group members also remaining silent), everyone avoids the potential public embarrassment.

And if you are the sender, remember that it is easiest to avoid embarrassment by not making mistakes in the first place. So always proofread before you hit "send"!

(continued)

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Think about a professional situation that you have experienced where there were multiple senders and receivers on an e-mail and a mistake was made. How was it handled?
2. Regarding your own e-mail example, were there cultural implications that factored into how the people on the e-mail responded to one another?
3. If a mistake is made in an e-mail that must be corrected, how can you do so in a way that saves the face of the sender, while also conveying the correct information?

Time Orientation and Culture

Time is a finite concept; we measure it in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, and years or by cycles of the moon and tides, the weather, the movement of planets and stars in the solar system. Time is also a form of nonverbal communication that is structured formally and informally by a culture. According to Edward Hall (1976), "time is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of existence that we are hardly aware of the degree to which it determines and coordinates everything we do, including the molding of relationships with others in many subtle ways" (p. 18). Perception of time is very subjective. A minute waiting for something exciting can seem like forever, and an hour when you are doing something enjoyable can pass quickly.

Chronemics is the study of how a culture structures and uses time, including how individuals perceive, structure, emphasize, and respond to time, as well as how they interpret messages about time. Though time is a structured and formalized entity within and across cultures now, it was not always this way. For example, standard time in the United States did not commence until the spread of railroads as a popular form of human transportation in the mid-1800s made it necessary to establish cultural agreement about exact time. Trains were the first method of transportation that could move passengers from place to place in a relatively short amount of time. Unless 2 p.m. was the same time for every station, it would be difficult for passengers to arrive at the station on time and board the trains before departure. Even today, despite the different time zones around the world, there is agreement that the hours change, but the minutes stay consistent. Issues such as the importance of punctuality, the timing and duration of business and social visits, and the amount of time you should wait for someone who is late all vary from culture to culture. For example, arriving five minutes late for a business appointment in the United States would usually require a brief apology, but it may not be considered important in another country.

When you communicate with people of different cultures, variations in how you structure and use time can cause people to take offense when none was intended. However, time can also be used to send intentional messages to another person, and the person who has more power or influence in the interaction typically uses it for that purpose. For example, former U.S. President Harry Truman reportedly once kept a newspaper editor waiting for an appointment for more than 45 minutes. Finally, the editor asked the president's aide to check with the president about the long wait. Truman is said to have replied that when he had been a junior senator, the editor had kept him waiting for an hour and a half so, as far as Truman was concerned, the editor still had "45 minutes to go" (Sowell, 1994). Since Truman was president, and had more power than he did as a junior senator, he chose to and was permitted to use time in this intentional way. Time can, of course, be used to send a positive message as well—arriving very early for a presentation or submitting a project early can indicate great interest.

Hall (1959) introduced one important relationship between time and culture when he described monochronic and polychronic systems of time. In **monochronic time system cultures**, members prefer to attend to or schedule one task at a time. Time is viewed as a tangible and valuable item that can be gained or lost, and individuals adhere to formal time, which is regulated by a clock. Sayings such as "Time is money" and "I'm out of time" are expressions of a monochronic time system. In the United States, for example, people tend to be punctual about appointments, to focus on one thing at a time, and to get to the point quickly in conversation, interrupting others, if necessary, to move the conversation along. Such behaviors reflect an emphasis on concentration, commitment to a task, promptness, and compartmentalization, which are characteristic of a monochronic time system culture.

Keith Levit Photography/Thinkstock

▲ Though time is a finite concept, it is a form of nonverbal communication that differs across cultures. Chronemics is the study of how cultures structure and use time.

In contrast, individuals in **polychronic time system cultures** prefer to focus on and schedule multiple tasks at once. Time, according to this system, is ever changing and flexible and is based more on events rather than actual time. For example, Latin American and Mediterranean countries take much more time to establish a point in a conversation and to establish a relationship with someone. People in these cultures may carry on more than one conversation at a time and often consider it offensive to interrupt others when they are speaking (Novinger, 2001). Such characteristics reflect a culture's emphasis on commitment during interactions and interpersonal relationships and on acceptance of interruptions.

Monochronic and polychronic time are not just a product of dominant cultures; there can be differences between dominant and co-cultures and also between contexts. For example, though the United States as a whole tends to be a monochronic time system culture, residents of regions such as the South and California have a looser, more polychronic time system. In contrast, those from the Northeast typically adhere to a more monochronic time system. In addition, business and organizational contexts are more likely to be monochronic, and personal relationship contexts tend more toward polychronic time (Hall, 1990).

Monochronic and polychronic time can also vary depending on the individual communicator's temporal preferences. Dawna Ballard and David Seibold (2000) identify three **organizational temporal dimensions**, which are the different ways members of an organization believe that time should be structured:

- **Separation**: A temporal orientation that emphasizes an individual's desire to be separate or intermeshed with tasks and individuals in space and time.
- **Concurrency**: A temporal orientation that emphasizes an individual's preference to do either fewer tasks or more tasks at once.
- **Flexibility**: A temporal orientation that emphasizes an individual's desire to have either a more or less flexible schedule.

Monochronic individuals may prefer to be more separate, and less concurrent and flexible, and polychronic individuals may prefer less separation, and greater concurrency and flexibility. You can determine your own temporal orientation using Ballard and Seibold's (2000) scale, provided in the *Self-Test* feature.

SELF-TEST

Ballard and Seibold's Organizational Temporal Dimensions Scale

Answer each item as it applies to how you prefer to behave or act while you are at work or in a professional setting. Rate each question according to the following 5-point scale:

5 for *strongly agree*
4 for *slightly agree,*
3 for *unsure,*
2 for *slightly disagree*
1 for *strongly disagree*

1. Ideally, an office would be soundproof to filter out distractions.
2. I can successfully juggle several tasks in the same time frame at work.
3. I accomplish tasks at work by screening out distractions.
4. I consider my schedule open to change as people and events require.
5. I do several things at once during the course of my workday/work-shift.
6. I allow my work to be disturbed only by the most important people or priorities in my life.
7. I take a relaxed approach to daily plans in my personal life (e.g., easily changing plans if necessary).
8. I tend to separate myself (either mentally or physically) from coworkers when I need to concentrate.
9. It feels natural to do a number of activities or tasks at one time.
10. It is important for my schedule to remain flexible, so that I am able to meet all my responsibilities.
11. When given a choice, I work on one thing at a time at work.
12. I have been known to engage in a combination of activities at once.

Scoring

Separation: add items 1, 3, 6, 8, and 11, and divide by 5. This will give you a score, out of 5, where higher values (generally 3.5 to 5) indicate greater separation, and lower values (generally 1 to 2.5) indicate less separation. A score between 2.5 and 3.5 indicates moderate separation.

Concurrency: add items 2, 5, 9, and 12, and divide by 4. Use the same scoring system out of 5 as above.

Flexibility: add items 4, 7, and 10, and divide by 3. Use the same scoring system out of 5 as above.

(continued)

Consider Your Results

As noted above, each score is a number out of 5, where

- Higher values (generally 3.5 to 5) indicate greater separation, concurrency, or flexibility.
- Middle values (generally 2.5 to 3.5) indicate moderate separation, concurrency, or flexibility.
- Lower values (generally 1 to 2.5) indicate less separation, concurrency, or flexibility.

Based on this information, you can determine your preference for a specific organizational temporal dimension. Now take a moment to consider the following questions.

1. Are your temporal orientation scores consistent with how you prefer to do your work?
2. Do you think that your scores on these three dimensions match up with what your organization expects and how your coworkers view time?
3. If you have inconsistent time dimensions, could this be a possible reason for job dissatisfaction or difficulty when working with certain people? How might you use interpersonal communication to address this problem?

3.4 Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

You live and work in a multicultural world. To communicate well with someone whose cultural background may be very different from your own, you must understand the customs, values, and characteristics of that person's cultural heritage. One of the first requirements for understanding others is to be open-minded about foreign cultures and eager to learn how another person's perceptions and behaviors may differ from yours. The sections below identify a few specific steps to help you improve your intercultural communication competence, which is defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 249). As with interpersonal communication competence, intercultural communication competence involves acknowledging and balancing effectiveness and appropriateness, with a special consideration and appreciation of the different cultures needed to accomplish this delicate balance.

Travel Ink/Gallo Images/Getty Images

▲ Be sure to consider possible cultural differences when you interact with others. This can help improve your communication competence.

Understand Your Own and Others' Cultures

The first step in improved effectiveness and appropriateness is understanding your culture, as well as the cultures of those with whom you frequently interact or in which you spend time. Refer again to Table 3.2, Figures 3.2 and 3.3, and the organizational temporal dimensions self-test provided in this chapter. Now consider and explore the unique

combination of dominant and co-cultures that are part of your background and heritage, and then evaluate your interactions with others from different cultural backgrounds. Do you express an interest in learning about others' cultures? For example, when you have booked a trip to visit a foreign country, do you attempt to learn more about its culture before you visit? While there, do you make an effort to chat with the locals and spend time in areas that are not visited by as many tourists? Are you open to the specific traditions and preferences of that culture, or do you behave entirely as you would if you were home in your dominant culture? Most people are eager to share information about their heritage and the unique features of their cultures, and you will learn a great deal not only about the other culture but about yourself as well. When you engage in communication with people from other cultures, remember to also keep in mind the aspects and characteristics of intercultural communication discussed in this chapter.

Acknowledge and Accept Cultural Differences

Whether you interact with different cultural values where you live or when you are traveling abroad, it is important to recognize that you will encounter cultural differences. Basic information about different cultures—which can be accessed online or in travel guides—can help you anticipate and accept intercultural communication differences that may arise during your interactions with others. For example, when in a country where a language that is foreign to you is spoken, learning to say "hello," "goodbye," "please," and "thank you" in that language is always a good place to start. Also keep in mind the principles of CAT described in this chapter and be conscious of how you adjust your verbal and nonverbal messages.

These efforts help decrease negative perceptions people sometimes have of cultures other than their own. For instance, the expression "ugly American," coined from a 1958 novel of the same name, by Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer, has been used to describe Americans traveling abroad who act offensively with their arrogance and privilege. What factors advanced this stereotype of Americans traveling abroad? It may be tied to the strongly individualistic culture in the United States, but it is primarily the result of specific travelers who act inappropriately in a new place. The lesson here is that you can facilitate your communication competence and change preconceptions by acknowledging and accepting the inevitable differences between cultures. The *Web Field Trip* feature offers more tips on how to deal with the culture shock involved in traveling abroad.

WEB FIELD TRIP

Managing Culture Shock

The U. S. Department of State offers educational, professional, and cultural exchange programs for individuals who are interested in extended immersions in other countries. There are several different programs available for applicants (including arts, technology, and youth programs) that focus on specific topic areas. Visit the website (http://exchanges.state.gov/us) and locate the article "Adjusting to a New Culture" (http://exchanges.state.gov/us/adjusting-new-culture), located under the Exchange Experience tab. This information provides an in-depth look at culture shock, a period of adjustment that visitors often encounter when living in culture that is different from their own. Review the content and consider the following questions.

(continued)

Critical Thinking Questions

1. Compare and contrast the three phases of culture shock. How might the suggestions for diminishing culture shock help address the symptoms associated with each of these three phases?
2. If you were to host an exchange program participant, what could you do to help him or her manage their culture shock?

Strive to Overcome Ethnocentrism

As discussed earlier, resist the tendency to think "mine is better" when comparing your culture to that of others. We are inclined to evaluate other cultures on the basis of our own society's dominant culture, and too often people conclude that our way of doing things is superior. We occasionally convey an ethnocentric attitude, without realizing it, through our language choices. Instead of saying, for example, "In Britain, they drive on the wrong side of the road," say, "In Britain, they drive on the left side of the road." Remember that other cultures can be (and frequently are) different. These differences are not wrong or strange, and we can learn to recognize the importance and value of other people's cultures.

One specific way to do this is to apply the concepts in this chapter to a culture that is different than yours. For example, is that culture low or high context? Individualistic or collectivistic? Monochronic or polychronic? Identifying these cultural characteristics can help you understand why members of that culture behave and communicate the way that they do. Understanding the source of the differences between your culture and another culture can shift your thinking away from evaluating other cultures as "good" or "bad." As we discussed earlier in the chapter, one of the most important skills of competent communicators in today's multicultural and globalized world is the ability to recognize that cultures are not right or wrong; they are merely different from one another.

Recognize the Unique Importance of Nonverbal Communication

As individuals in a dominant, low-context culture, most Americans rely more on verbal communication to communicate with one another, but nonverbal communication sometimes is more helpful for intercultural communication. On a wider scale, nonverbal communication includes aspects of the environment and appearance, so observe your surroundings and monitor what people are wearing to better understand and adjust to different cultures that you might visit. Though it is difficult to understand someone who speaks a different language, there are also many nonverbal messages that have the same, or similar, meanings across cultures, and using such messages in an intercultural interaction can help you achieve shared meaning with someone, even if you do not share the same language. For example, nodding one's head is a nearly universal nonverbal gesture that indicates yes—though in certain areas of central Europe, such as Bulgaria, Albania, and Macedonia, a single head nod upward may also communicate disagreement. Though there is no official universal language or nonverbal way to communicate with others, acknowledging and accepting that each culture is unique can motivate you to learn about other cultures and teach you to be flexible, accepting the differences that may arise between your culture and another culture.

Summary and Resources

Every society has a unique culture which embodies the specialized set of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and rules of that society. People are often unaware how much their culture and the various subcultures to which they belong influence their behavior and their communication. Culture affects every aspect of your life: how you dress and adorn your body, how you behave, what you eat, what you celebrate, how you raise and educate your children, and how you view life and death. It also dictates how you use physical space, how you conceive of time, and other aspects of your perception of the world through your physical senses. When individuals from different cultures come into direct contact with one another, intercultural communication occurs. You carry elements of culture with you into interactions with members of your own and other cultures, and these remnants of your cultural heritage strongly influence your communication and relationships with others.

Most societies have a dominant culture, which may or may not represent the majority of the population. A culture is considered dominant when it reflects social institutions such as the media, educational institutions, law, political processes, business, and artistic expression. Immigrant groups must become socialized to the dominant culture of the country to which they immigrate because this culture reflects the norms of the society.

In addition to a dominant culture, societies have various co-cultures—regional, economic, social, religious, or ethnic groups—that also exert influence over people in that society. The co-cultures have their own patterns of behavior that may differ from the dominant culture. Cultures and co-cultures exert a great deal of subtle pressure on their members to conform to the cultural norms because these norms perform important functions in maintaining the society. The media also influences, and is influenced by, both the dominant culture and co-cultures.

Culture also assists in creating a perspective that impacts how its members view the world. Your dominant culture is so central that it influences your communication in significant ways. In addition, culture provides identity, which is a consistent set of attitudes that defines who you are and shapes how you view and describe yourself. Your primary identity includes consistent aspects of your identity, such as biological sex, race or ethnicity, and age. One's primary identity is difficult to permanently alter. In contrast, your secondary identity includes more malleable aspects of your identity, such as your socioeconomic status or occupation. Though secondary identity can be just as important as an aspect of primary identity, it can change over time.

All cultures incorporate both verbal and nonverbal elements in their communication. Misunderstandings often arise because cultures can be very different in the emphasis they place on these verbal and nonverbal elements. Some cultures, such as the United States, are considered low-context communication cultures and place a great deal of emphasis on the words used in communication. High-context communication cultures such as Japan, on the other hand, rely more on nonverbal context or behavior than on verbal symbols. In a high-context message, much of the information is contained in the nonverbal elements, in a ritualized response, or in the context in which the communication takes place.

Another fundamental way in which cultures differ is their tendency toward individualism or collectivism. Individualistic cultures value self-reliance and self-motivation and are stimulated by individual competition. Collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, tend to value the needs of the group over the needs of the individual and place a premium on cooperation and harmony. A specific aspect of distinctions between individualism and collectivism are the concept of saving face, acknowledging status, or respecting the position of other people. The concept of face appears in

most cultures, but it manifests itself in different ways in different cultures. In an individualistic culture, face is often a source of personal pride or self-respect, but in a collectivistic culture, people want to preserve group pride and respect.

A final aspect of cultural membership that is important to interpersonal communication is time. Specifically, **chronemics** is the study of a culture's structure and use of time, including how individuals perceive, structure, emphasize, and respond to time, and how they interpret time messages. Cultures can range on a continuum of monochronic (focusing upon one task at a time and viewing time as tangible) to polychronic (focusing upon multiple tasks at one time and seeing time as flexible) time systems. These time systems can also relate to temporal dimensions, which are beliefs about how time should be structured.

Improving your intercultural communication skills requires that you recognize that cultures are different and not "right" or "wrong" in the ways in which their members behave. You must also understand your own culture, be interested in learning about other cultures, strive to overcome the ethnocentrism and negative stereotypes that can hinder your ability to interact in a positive way, and acknowledge the importance of nonverbal communication in intercultural communication situations.

Key Terms

acculturation A process by which immigrants in a particular society learn and begin to adopt the norms, traditions, and beliefs of the dominant culture.

chronemics The study of how a culture structures and uses time, including how individuals perceive, structure, emphasize, and respond to time and messages about time.

co-cultures Regional, economic, social, religious, or ethnic groups that are not the dominant culture but still exert influence in a society.

collectivistic cultures Cultures that value cooperation and harmony and consider the needs of the group to be more important than the needs of the individual.

communication accommodation theory (CAT) An intercultural communication theory developed to help explain how individuals from different groups or cultures interact with one another.

concurrency An organizational temporal dimension that emphasizes an individual's preference to do either fewer tasks or more tasks at once.

convergence An element of CAT that identifies how a communicator alters verbal or nonverbal messages *toward* those used by other communicators in an interaction.

culture A relatively specialized set of traditions, beliefs, values, and norms that have been passed down from generation to generation.

divergence An element of CAT that identifies how a communicator alters verbal or nonverbal messages *away from* those used by other communicators in an interaction.

dominant culture The established language, religion, behavior, values, rituals, and social customs of a society.

enculturation A process by which individuals in a particular society learn and adopt the norms, traditions, and beliefs of the dominant culture.

ethnocentric A belief that one's own group or culture is superior to that of others.

face The standing or position a person has in the eyes of others.

flexibility An organizational temporal dimension that emphasizes an individual's desire to have either a more or less flexible schedule.

high-context culture A culture that emphasizes the implicit meaning of nonverbal contexts or behaviors used in a message.

identity A consistent set of attitudes that defines who one is and shapes how one views and describes one's self.

identity gaps Discrepancies between the authentic self and the self that one believes another person finds more appealing.

individualistic culture A culture that values self-reliance, self-motivation, belief in personal freedom and privacy, and personal achievement.

intercultural communication An area of communication study that focuses on communication processes in interactions that involve communicators from differing cultural and co-cultural backgrounds.

low-context culture A culture that emphasizes the explicit meaning of words used in a message.

monochronic time system culture A culture that views time as a tangible and valuable item and prefers to attend to or schedule one task at a time.

normative The influence of culture in establishing the rules, regulations, and norms that govern behaviors in a particular society.

norms Standards of behavior in a given group or society.

open system A culture, as defined by systems theory, that has continuous inputs and outputs from and to the surrounding environment, influencing and being influenced by other cultures.

organizational temporal dimensions The different ways that members of an organization believe that time should be structured.

ostracized Excluded or removed from a group by others in that group.

overaccommodation An element of CAT that identifies how a communicator alters verbal or nonverbal messages beyond those used by other communicators in an interaction.

polychronic time system culture A culture that views time as a flexible, event-dependent item and prefers to focus on and schedule multiple tasks at one time.

primary identity Consistent aspects of one's identity, which includes biological sex, race or ethnicity, nationality, religion, and age.

secondary identity More malleable roles and characteristics of one's identity, which can include socioeconomic status, occupation, and relationship status.

separation An organizational temporal dimension that emphasizes an individual's desire to be separate or intermeshed with tasks and individuals in space and time.

stereotypes Fixed opinions or preconceptions, usually negative, about someone based on perceived characteristics or expectations and rather than factual information.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Which is your dominant culture and with which co-cultures do you identify? Which of these cultures is most central in shaping your identity and why?
2. Recall an intercultural interaction in which you were involved that you felt went well, and another that went poorly. Using the terms in this chapter, what do you think was the difference between these interactions that led to these different outcomes?
3. Using the descriptions from this chapter, how would you classify yourself regarding cultural context, individualism/collectivism, and time orientation? Are your classifications similar to or different from your dominant culture?
4. Have you ever experienced a situation where you felt as if you were stereotyped? How did it impact your communication?
5. How do you use technology and social media in your intercultural interactions? How do you think your online persona reflects your dominant culture or co-cultures?