

Recognizing Deep Culture's Influence on Communicative Behavior

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"Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen."

Albert Einstein

1 Introduction

Communication and transportation technology has greatly advanced intercultural interaction. With technology, we can now talk face-to-face via internet videophone simultaneously in real-time with several people anywhere in the world. Airline travel has made overseas travel an easy choice. Television programs are now available twenty-four hours a day to anyone around the world with cable, satellite or an internet connection.

Second, world economies are becoming globalized at a relatively fast rate. Often market successes or failures in one country's economy have a spin-off affect on several others. One country's interest rate policies can have far reaching affects beyond its own borders. International investment funds are now more common linking economies and affecting decision-making. Today it is not uncommon for an "American" computer to have a screen made in Korea, a microchip manufactured in Japan, a keyboard produced in Taiwan and plastic parts made in China.

Finally, immigration has become such a force that is beginning to change entire cultural landscapes. For example, in the Western American states, South American immigrants have changed the political and social make-up of local and state governments. Japan has seen a significant increase in people wanting to live and work here. With more and more people from different cultures coming into contact with each other, it is now common place to encounter people with vastly different backgrounds and values than your own.

The influence of these three factors has influenced intercultural interaction making the study of Intercultural Communication more important than ever. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005:3) offer six reasons for intercultural education and training: Adapting to globa

l and domestic workforce diversity, improving multicultural health care communication, engaging in creative problem solving, enhancing intercultural relationship satisfaction, deepening self-awareness, fostering global and intrapersonal peace. Deepening our own self-awareness is crucial first step in order to recognize and understand the importance of culture and the significant impact it has on all aspects of our behavior. To do this, we need to study culture.

Thus, the overall goal of this paper is to highlight and discuss the importance of culture and how it can affect our communication in intercultural contexts. We shall discuss the affect culture can have on communication in cross-cultural contexts using specific examples from Japanese and English speakers. Two culture models are presented for understanding and making sense of cross-cultural events. The final purpose of this paper is to offer a way for readers and intercultural students to think about and explore culture's influence on their communicative behavior.

2 Culture

Culture has a powerful unseen force on communication behavior. Yet it is vastly underestimated as a significant factor affecting on our perception and communication behavior. Our culture is part of what makes up our self-identity and unconsciously helps us interpret events and make decisions without much effort. Culture is not something we are born with but rather something we have learned. It is passed on to us from our family, schools, friends, work experiences. Culture has been described as,

“... a learned meaning system that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed down from one generation to the next and are shared by varying degrees by interacting members of a community”
(Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005:28)

As these authors note, cultural norms are influenced by the traditions, beliefs and values of a culture (2005:33). A **value** is something we believe is “right” or “wrong” which along with traditions and beliefs develop our cultural **norms** of what we regard to be “good” and “bad” behavior.

2.1 Conflicting cultural norms caused by divergent cultural values

“Misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication often begins with a misunderstanding of ourselves” (Yamada 1997:147)

The first step in successful intercultural communication is recognizing our own unique cultural norms. To do this, we need either live in a culture outside our own or have some kind of intercultural training and education. Even if we are aware of the divergent values, traditions and norms, we may have difficulty in adapting to them in an intercultural context. For example, the following is an excerpt from a Chinese international student's journal attending my intercultural communication seminar. When asked to give an example of how she reconciled the individual wants and desires of her own self-identity with the needs of the group to maintain harmony, she wrote :

I can recall several times in Japan where my heart wanted to go one way, but realization that if that were to occur, my loyalty to the group would be put into question, in order to stray from possible ostracism, which is not something to be grappled with, I utilized my *tatema*. Thus, when conflict occurs between what one feels and what one shows, they (Japanese) must think about how their actions will affect how they are perceived by the entire group.

She was able to compromise or find a common ground for successful intercultural interaction by reconciling her own cultural values and with those in Japan. The Japanese term, *tatema* and *honne* refer to the outer, social self or what is expected of you and the inner, private self or what you truly want respectively (Gundykunst and Kim 2003:58). These two concepts are really the key to “good” communication in Japan as this student has demonstrated. American communication, however, is based on *honne* for clarity and directness while Japanese communication is based on *tatema* so that social harmony will not be disrupted. These two cultural concepts often collide and when one side has no interest in compromise, the intercultural relationship is in danger of breaking down and failing altogether unless our intercultural awareness is deepened.

2.2 Dynamic culture

Pick up any intercultural textbook and somewhere in the discussion of culture, you will read that culture is a dynamic phenomenon. If you keep reading further, you will soon discover that culture is also stable. Herein lies one of the reasons that defining culture is so problematic. Which one is it? Is culture truly dynamic or is it stable? The answer is that culture is both. They are not mutually exclusive. Culture is dynamic in the sense that it changes, evolves, over time as peoples values and norms change. Because we learn much of our culture from our parents, culture is also dynamic in the sense that it has a powerful, vigorous affect on our behavior. These adjectives convey the meaning of being dynamic in the sense that each person uses their own unique personality characteristics to bear on the larger values of the society in which they live. Culture is dynamic in the sense that individuals are all unique regardless of their culture. It is also dynamic in the sense that it continually evolves according to the underpinning values system of the people who created it. For example, like the US, more people in Japan are having weight problems, dubbed “metabolic syndrome” , due to the change in eating habits and decreased physical activity. Japanese society is evolving into a country that now values eating fast food, and prepackaged bread. So, the underlying value for what is “good” to eat has steadily changed the eating behavior. This value was not immediate but took time for people to learn from parents and friends. This is what is meant by culture being “dynamic.” It changes according to the value system of society as a whole and is not dynamic in the sense that it changes according to individuality. The study of individual variation lies in the realm of psychology (Stewart and Bennett 1991:14).

2.3 Stability of culture

Culture is stable in the sense that it takes time for a society’ s norms and values to change. The definition of culture above states that culture is passed down from generation to generation. It has a deep structure or “deep culture.” This refers to the norms and values that have become entrenched in society over generations. Deep culture is important “because of the institutions of family, church, and state *give each individual his or her unique identity*” (Samovar and Porter 2003:10).

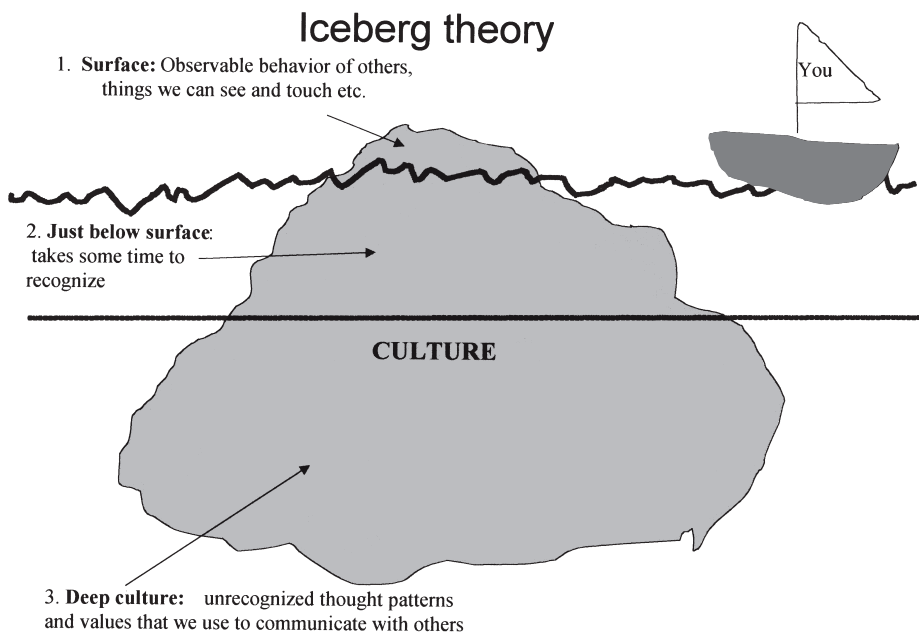
“... the deep structure of a culture resists major alterations. That is, changes in dress, food, transportation, housing and the like, though appearing to be important, are simply attached to the existing value system; however, values associated with such things as ethics and morals, work and leisure, definitions of freedom, the importance of the past, religious practices, the pace of life and the attitudes toward gender and age are entrenched so deeply in a culture that they persist generations after generation.”

(Samovar and Porter 2003:10)

3 Identifying deep culture

Diagram 1 below illustrates the classic cultural “iceberg theory.” This theory has been revised to include three levels instead of the original two – the surface and below.

Diagram 1



On the surface are daily activities that we can observe easily and physically touch. In Japan, taking ones shoes off, using chopsticks or bowing are all easily observable behavior

by anyone regardless of culture they come from. When we travel to foreign countries, the different customs of people on the street are readily observable.

The next level of culture describes behavior that takes a little more time to understand. We may be able to immediately recognize a difference but have difficulty in understanding the meaning. For instance, when I first came to Japan, I observed sumo wrestlers throwing a white substance into the dojoyou or ring. Since the only small white substance I knew of with any significance to Japanese was white rice, I erroneously assumed that these wrestlers were throwing rice into the ring. I could not understand why but later learned that this was indeed salt used as a purifying ritual. Another example of behavior that takes time to understand would be greetings in Japan. For example, I once was riding the train back home in Nagoya when by chance I sat across from one of my former students. I was surprised and my American values unconsciously kicked in when I said smiling, “Oh, hi Ms. Ito. I’ m surprised to see you again. Where are you going?” Her curt reply was simply, “chotto.” I was taken aback by this answer which effectively terminated my attempt at conversation and I never saw her again. What follows is an excerpt from a Japanese student in my intercultural communication seminar explaining the Japanese use of “chotto.”

“(When) requested to do something impossible by someone, we Japanese often say “chotto” so as to refuse it. It means, “I have something else to do. So I’ m sorry, but I can’ t.” However, we dare not say all, since we tend to avoid hurting anyone.”

In actuality, I did not care where she was going but was just trying to make conversation. My learned American values were telling me that it is uncomfortable and rude to sit in front of someone you know and not make conversation. It would be difficult to get on an elevator with strangers in the US and not say anything. Second, I mistakenly assumed the value of “social equality.” When encountering someone for the first time, this value will often result in Americans asking generalized personal questions rather than professional ones because of the value of “social equality” and “aliveness.” Asking what job one has comes off as high-handed to Americans since we are all equal outside our workplace.

The third and most important level is the one we cannot see at all. It is goes unrecognized in our daily lives. This is deep culture. It is so assumed into our consciousness that it is difficult to come up with examples. One example is the passive nature of Japanese

students. When most native English speakers first begin teaching in Japan, they are unprepared for the lack of feedback from their Japanese students. Thus, the American deep culture filter interprets this lack of interaction or feedback as indifference, incomprehension or dislike. In reality, Japanese students are following their deep cultural norm of respecting authority and by not openly showing emotion or questioning their teacher. So, there are two deep cultural values at play against each other in the Japanese EFL classroom. The American value of social equality exhibited by the norm of open and direct communication and the Japanese value of social hierarchy which exhibits the norm of silence and hierarchical communication style. This deep culture difference often causes misunderstandings. In sum, “because Americans assume hierarchy and closeness are mutually exclusive, they are confused by the way Japanese language encodes hierarchical relationships” (Yamada 1997:33).

The iceberg model is a useful metaphor for students first trying to understand intercultural communication. However, like most metaphors, it is an oversimplification. For instance, it is easy to see if a shop is open or not in Japan if the NOREN (shop curtain) is hung outside or not. This is easily noticeable and serves as an open and closed sign. Anyone who has spent some time in Japan knows this. What is interesting is, although it is easily observable action, the interpretation of it is only clear to those familiar with Japanese culture. The foreign sojourner will probably not even notice whether the NOREN hung in or outside and, if they do, will have difficulty making any sense of the meaning or come to the wrong conclusion altogether. This is because the foreign sojourner has learned a different set of symbols from which to derive meanings. That is, (s)he will unconsciously be looking for an “open” or “closed” sign or even shop hours sign but not a short piece of cloth hanging outside or inside the entryway. The Japanese custom of hanging a NOREN outside shops follows a central value of Japanese culture: implicit communication. Nothing is written on the NOREN such as shop hours or “closed.” It is up to the person (listener/reader) observing the behavior to interpret the correct meaning. Thus, even “surface” cultural behavior that is readily observable by all can go unnoticed or interpreted differently by someone from another culture. The verbal equivalent to this would be the ambiguous Japanese answer of, “muzukashii” or literally “it’s difficult” but often used to mean, “I can’t do it” to refuse a request without being explicit. Upon arriving to Japan, when I first heard this request, I understood it literally to mean, “it’s difficult” and expecting the listener to explain something like, “it’s difficult, but if we do this or that, I think we can do it” or “it’s too difficult

because" This is the type of response most Americans would expect to hear. Now, many years later, when I hear this phrase, I know that it means that the listener has heard and understand my request but does not or cannot do it for some reason and that I should not press further. Like the NOREN example above, Japanese communication relies on the listener (me) to interpret correctly the speaker's true meaning. A person who can do this in Japan is considered a good communicator. Conversely, in American culture, it is for the speaker to confirm that the listener understands what (s)he, the speaker, is saying. This requires direct and open talk. In sum, the learned deep cultural value of "be explicit" vs "be implicit" in communication is one of the biggest differences in communication in Japanese and English.

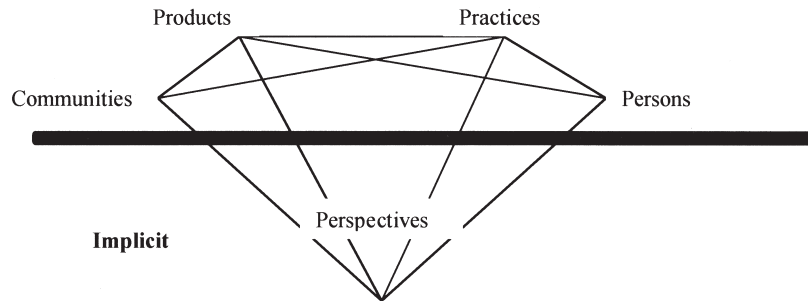
Finally, deep culture is highly dependent on non-verbal signals to convey meaning. We learn as children how to convey meaning non-verbally and perceive the correct meaning. These signals differ significantly across cultures and can easily lead to misunderstandings. American English communication is based on explicitness and directness where the speaker assumes all responsibility for making her or himself understood. However, in Japan, communication is often done non-verbally or ambiguously putting the responsibility on the listener to interpret correctly. Below is an excerpt from a Japanese intercultural communication student on how he perceives non-verbal communication at his part-time job.

"I work at a convenience store as my part-time job. If customers buy a lunch box, I ask them "Shall I heat up it?" . Then I perceive their facial expression. Because some customers doesn't reply clearly. So I can't hear them. And I don't want to ask the same thing. And they don't like to be asked twice. So, I perceive their facial expression. If they need to heat up, they bow and smile a little bit. If they don't need to do that, they bend their head a little bit with blank face. My behavior (either heating up or not) is done by perception to customers. I think that it (is) culture-based."

3.1 Moran' s culture model

Moran' s model (2001) is useful for analyzing cultural differences between two organizations as it separates culture into five categories in order to highlight differences (see Diagram 2).

Diagram 1



(Moran 2001:28)

In this model, culture is broken down further than the iceberg model in section 3 and asks questions to highlight cultural differences for each category.

1. Communities: What groups participate directly and indirectly?
2. Products: What are the physical settings? Things you can touch and see?
3. Practices: What do people say and do? How do they act and interact ?
4. Persons: Who are the people who participate? What is their relationship?
5. Perspectives: What are the underlying values, beliefs and attitudes?

You can see that the surface culture of the iceberg theory would correspond with numbers 1-4 while the deep structure of culture would be number 5 - perspectives. Below is an example of the way the model could be used to analyze two organizations with similar surface cultures.

	McDonalds	MosBurger
Communities	employees, customers, suppliers, garbage collectors	employees, customers, suppliers, garbage collectors
Products	Store, tables, booths, chairs, counter, menu, waste baskets, food, wrappings, cups, napkins, bright lighting, restrooms, trays, cash registers, food preparation machines, freezers, cooking oil etc	Store, tables, booths, chairs, counter, menu, waste baskets, food, wrappings, cups, napkins, bright lighting, restrooms, trays, cash registers, food preparation machines, freezers, cooking oil etc

Practices	Greeting, smile, formulaic question/answer (e.g. for here or to go?), ordering at counter, paying cashier, taking a number, waiting, carrying food on tray to seat, <i>shouting out of waiting customers numbers, food is sometimes brought to seated customers, finished customers throw away their own garbage, customers seldom linger</i>	Greeting, smile, formulaic question/answer (e.g. for here or to go?), ordering at counter, paying cashier, taking a number, waiting, carrying food on tray to seat, <i>food is always brought to seated customers, finished customers have their garbage taken care of if possible, customers often linger</i>
Persons	Employee/customer	Employee/customer
Perspectives	<i>Cheap, fast and friendly service. emphasize convenience and speed</i>	<i>Medium priced, friendly service, home cooked approach, food take a little more time because it is cooked to order, relaxed store atmosphere</i>

You can see from this simple comparison of two fast food restaurant chains that on the surface, the two companies are very similar. However, if we look deeper, at the deep culture, each has a slightly different approach to doing business (italicized). Deep culture (perspectives) differences result in diverse observable practices and a unique experience for the customer. If this same model was applied to two multinational corporations, for example Toyota Motors and Ford Motors, there would undoubtedly be significant deep structure differences that drive each companies unique way of doing business.

4 Discussion

As countries continue to globalize and we interact with others from different cultures with different ways of doing business, intercultural education and training has become more important than ever. Each person views their own way behavior as “normal” because it follows the norms and accepted ways of interaction of their deep culture. Thus, our common sense is dictated by what we have learned through the years of an unrecognized enculturation process of deep culture that cannot be shed be merely becoming more aware. It was argued that understanding our own deep culture is important because, “by knowing the deep structure of culture you can better understand how that structure influences perception and communication” Samovar and Porter 2003:14). To be successful, intercultural communicators, we also need to be willing to compromise some of our cultural

norms for the benefit of a greater good: successful and long-lasting intercultural relationships.

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