

# Cultural Bias in Intercultural Communication

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(Intercultural Communication)

## 1. Introduction

Imagine you are charged with collecting, interpreting and analyzing information from a different country far away from your own. This task is important not just for yourself but for the organization you represent as it will affect decision-making and behavior of those in your organization with the host culture. The people in the target country speak a different language, have a different belief system, religion, as well as unique behavioral and communication norms. Because you have access to information of this culture from your own national and social media and from the general literature of other sojourners' who have spent time there, you are not overly concerned about getting by in the target culture. You believe that by simply communicating in a humanistic, honest and open way, you will be successful regardless of a listener's cultural background. This scenario is not uncommon in today's world of easy international travel. Sojourners, particularly from the US, that value individualism often *assume* likeness and believe they can communicate effectively with others from different cultural backgrounds by simply *keeping an open mind and approaching interaction with openness and sincerity*. After all, we are all just human beings the thinking goes. Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (1986) identifies this way of thinking as "minimization" at the end of the ethnocentric stage. This minimization of cultural differences is used as a way of avoiding recognizing our own cultural patterns and prevents us from adapting to understanding others (Bennett, 2011). For organizations, this minimization often leads to difficulty in retaining employees from diverse cultural backgrounds because of an extreme emphasis on conformity, commonalities and a lack of recognition of their own unique cultural context in the world (Bennett, 2004). Furthermore, the western (low context) culture norms of open, direct, content based communication as an indication of sincerity is not highly valued in higher context cultures and, therefore, is not an expected communication norm. Hall (1976) characterized high context communication cultures as valuing nonverbal communication; meanings that are

shared implicitly by speaker/listener which are highly dependent on the context. As a result of these contrasting culture based norms, speakers can readily make negative judgements based on others' communicative behavior. For example, Akasu and Asao (1993, p. 99) found that high context communication based cultures tend to view low context speakers as immature, impatient or insensitive to others while the low context oriented speakers are frequently left with a feeling of insincerity and untrustworthiness when dealing with their high context counterparts. As a result, culture based communication norms can cause hidden biases that result in poor decision making and inaccurate judgements of others' behavior in cross-cultural contexts. The goal of this paper is to discuss several hidden biases that can be particularly harmful to cross-cultural communication.

## 2. National Culture, Identity and Communication

The behavior of the donkey is often misunderstood because it is often compared to that of a horse when in fact they are a separate species (Are Donkeys really stubborn, 2012).

The way we construct meaning is heavily influenced by our nationality, social identity, or the groups we belong to, and the physical geography of where we live or were raised. Issues or events that some people in one place accept as unproblematic and acceptable are considered completely unacceptable and wrong in others. What is it that causes these differences in viewpoint and interpretation? Why can two people from different places see the same thing but have a different interpretation of it? The basic starting point to begin answering this question is geography. Geography is the foundation that fosters the formation of a shared culture of traditions, norms and values among a community. People born and raised in the deserts of Africa are going to have different norms and values than people in Alaska, for example. From geography and place comes culture. Culture, defined as a system of learned meanings shared by a community, as a manifestation of geography of living space and social interaction, is the root of how we learn to find meaning in symbols, sounds and behavior. Culture is an abstract idea related to a “shared sense of values and ideas, recognizing that no two people share all the same values. The more ideas and values that two people share, the closer they are culturally, the more alike their cultural living is” (Everett, 2012, p. 48). Identities get built on and reinforced through language, cultural traditions, media, social institutions and national policies.

The knowledge we acquire and the assumptions we make in communication and decision

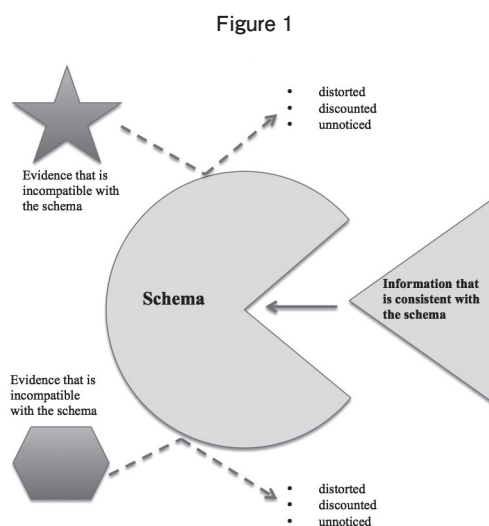
making are the product of “received wisdom” of what we have learned from elders, social groups or media (Robbins, 2014) within our national cultural boundary. Most of this type of received wisdom is readily accepted as being true despite the fact we have not experienced it first hand. In order to make sense of the complex web of information threatening to overload our senses, we need to continuously classify, organize and simplify in order to function efficiently. If the context of communication interaction is less known, the simplification process becomes even more important and we become more reliant on our received wisdom to understand complex events in our daily life.

This is why biases, such as assimilation bias, may occur when we try to fit what is happening in the real world with our previously learned point of view. Our values and norms are strongly underpinned by received wisdom giving a long-term stability to our national culture despite the dynamic nature of cultural adaptability, which gives us the capability of “getting by” in unfamiliar cultural contexts.

### 3. Schema, Cultural Constructs and Biases

To better understand hidden cultural biases, it is helpful to investigate the deep cultural structures that underpin our communication norms. We know that in order to communicate efficiently, we need to take mental shortcuts and simplify the complex world of stimuli surrounding our busy journey through daily life. Taking mental shortcuts to increase efficiency in thinking and communication involves the use of schema or schemata (pl.). It should be noted here that, in this paper’s description, schemata refers to the similar background knowledge, beliefs and values held by a group of people labeled as culture. This has a wider meaning than the term “cultural construct” which refers to a specific belief or understanding about something in the world shared by members of the same culture. Schemata are mental representations that organize our knowledge, beliefs and experiences into easily accessible categories. Research has shown that our behavior is connected to the type of information we store in our brains (Nishida 2005, p. 402). Thus, schemata provide a structure or framework of interpretation to our mental biases. Nishida (2005) identifies eight types of cultural schemas: fact-and-concept schema, person schema, self schema, role schema, context schema, procedure schema, strategy schema, and emotion schema. These schema activate preexisting knowledge such as problem solving strategies and social role expectations. Each framework greatly aids in making sense of complex information and guides us to be able to communicate efficiently. However, schemata, because of their

simplified framework, also result in unconscious biases that have great potential to be harmful to understanding in the communication process. Schema bias represent our core (cultural) beliefs and are resistant to change. This resistance creates hidden biases that influence how we interpret communicative behavior among other things. Information that does not fit tends to be unrecognized, ignored, rejected or distorted while information that fits our schema tends to make existing schema stronger (see Figure 1).



As Figure 1 illustrates, existing schema tends to be resistant to conflicting new information because it takes more mental effort to incorporate it. We tend to follow the path of least resistance and allow information that already fits with our preexisting set of knowledge to make decision making easier and more efficient. Because individuals construct their subjective reality on their biased interpretations of input, a cognitive bias is formed that affects behavior and decision making. Although cognitive bias enables faster “lazy” decision making and efficient information processing, it is highly dependent on the preexisting knowledge of schemata.

“...most of the behaviors we label as cultural are automatic and invisible and are usually performed without you being aware of them” (Samovar et al, 2007, p. 27).

Communication is a dynamic process of creating shared meaning in ongoing interactions

that involves making inferences and interpreting symbols in a systematic way. This complex process is underpinned mostly by cultural norms that are hidden away or go unrecognized to the conscious mind. Communicating efficiently within our own national cultural identity involves having an assumed set of common knowledge underpinned by a learned system of cultural values, or *cultural schemata*. For example, the American cultural self, for instance, is underpinned with the schemata of existentialism, individualism and competition. In contrast, the Japanese cultural self is underpinned by the deep expectations of social harmony, social hierarchy and interdependence. Cognitive psychologists have discovered that some schema is retrieved automatically with little effort while other schema takes a conscious mental effort to activate. The automatic retrieval of schemata can create hidden biases in the way we behave, make decisions and make judgements of others. Hidden biases can guide our behavior without our being aware of their role (Banaji and Greewald, 2014, p. 15). Most often, it greatly aids in the communication and interpretation processes by allowing us to simplify and predict others' behavior. However, in cross-cultural context, automatic schema retrieval based interpretations can be problematic and may have long term repercussions because both parties are interpreting the same event differently. For instance, the high context cultural expectation of younger colleagues deferring to their elders in meetings would most likely not be interpreted favorably by low context culture participants.

#### 4. Cognitive Bias

Biases are underpinned by our mental representations of knowledge or schemata. The acquired knowledge we use to communicate smoothly in our native cultures exist as dynamic sets of schema continually built-up through repeated use and exposure to a limited number of groups who also share similar values, norms and experiences. These commonalities make communication more efficient because both speakers know generally what to expect and how to behave. However, in cross-cultural contexts, the norms that culturally diverse people base their behavior on, often clash due to hidden background knowledge. In addition, the complex amount of new stimuli, forces us to simplify and choose which stimuli are important or and which are less so. The result of this phenomena is labeled cognitive bias. "Because we are not capable of perceiving everything in our environment, our focus is automatically drawn to the most prominent or "eye-catching"- that is, perceptually salient - stimuli" (Shiraev and Levy, 2013, p. 69). The result of his tendency is to

try to explain behavior of other's based on internal factors rather than the external situational context. This results in what is called fundamental attribution error and would seem to be especially strong in Western, egocentric, cultures.

Biases can also be defined as "bits of knowledge about social groups" that get stored in our brains (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013, p. 20) . This knowledge forms unrecognized biases or schema that "...can influence our behavior toward members of particular social groups, but we remain oblivious to their influence" (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013, p. 20).

Unrecognized biases have a profound effect on the communication process and behavior. Yet, we tend to ignore or underestimate the affect that cultural norms and values can have in our daily lives and much less so when interacting with different cultures. Banaji and Greenwald (2013) describe how hidden biases guide our behavior without our being aware of it. The mind is said to be an automatic association-making machine which we use to make decisions and interpret the external world. The authors describe examples such as how a small change in language can produce a significant change in what is remembered - called the *misinformation effect*. (2013, p. 37). This has shown to have significant ramifications in legal (e.g. false confessions) and medical contexts (e.g. right to know). Clearly biases have a strong affect on thinking and perception but also on decision-making.

These biases can become more magnified in cross-cultural communication because of the received wisdom of deep cultural differences in thinking and verbal and non-verbal behavior. Despite our good intentions to communicate effectively with someone from another culture, comprehension difficulties that lie below the surface of our immediate understanding can result in confusion, misunderstanding and negative stereotyping in critical areas of interaction such as in health care, international business (see Ryan, 2007) and diplomacy (see Ryan, 2015) contexts. A first step in successful long-term cultural understanding would be to develop a meta-awareness or growing our understanding of "knowing what we don't know" as we interact with others from cultures other than our own. In order to develop a better meta-awareness, we need understand how our thinking processes go from automatic to conscious awareness. Generally, humans go through their daily lives on automatic pilot only taking notice of things that peak our interest or present some kind of threat socially or physically. Khaneman labels the automatic unconscious thinking "System 1" thinking and a slow, more deliberate conscious thinking as "System 2". Operating in the lazy but efficient System 1 mode allows us to make decisions quickly and communicate smoothly with others. This type of thinking for the most part operates on past experience, accepted cultural norms

and values.

The switch from the automatic, smooth mental processing of System 1 to the focused, thoughtful and conscious thinking of System 2, can be experienced by driving your car and listening to the radio or audio book. The action of driving a car while listening is automatic and quite easy. However, when suddenly faced with the task of passing a bus blocking the lane, we automatically switch to System 2 to focus on the task at hand and ignore or block out our System 1 voice. After the perceived danger has passed, we return to the easy and not very mentally taxing behavior of driving and listening to music or spoken word. However, in that interval of switching between the two types of mental processing, we will not have been able to process what was being said (or sung). Indeed, I often find myself replaying the last 30 seconds on my audiobook to hear it again if I encounter a situation while driving that required my full attention. Several factors can cause this automatic switch. The first trigger is something that is perceived to be a clear and present danger. The bus blocking our path or a pedestrian suddenly appearing in the road ahead immediately creates a danger of collision and unless we modify our behavior, will result in physical injury or possibly death.

Rare or unusual stimuli are another cause for switching our focus. Much of our daily lives is a routine of seeing and doing the same types of things. However, if something that is unusual appears, we tend to focus on this event. For instance, after passing the bus, if we come upon two vehicles in a minor accident, this may very well catch our attention and trigger the switch and block out our automatic mental processing for a short time. In a cross-cultural context the speaker/listener may be overly focused on language accuracy so that the meaning is not shared or misunderstood. Bias trigger stimuli are culturally derived and context driven and, therefore, problematic to predict. Sociocultural factors can cause a switch from automatic to a more focused type of thinking. Behavior such as acting modestly, speaking directly or indirectly, and other non-verbal behavior is highly dependent on cultural norms and values unique to each society and nation. Understanding cross-cultural communication is highly dependent on interpreting a speaker's intentions and spoken and unspoken messages. We may worry that we will make a social gaffe forcing us to concentrate (i.e. activate System 2) and change our communication behavior to get by without realizing that we have missed the intended message.

Alternatively, we may not be conscious of cultural differences to be able to activate System 2 in order to adapt or get by in particular cultural contexts. System 1 thinking

remains dormant until the perceived social threat is gone, and we return to our comfortable and automatic way of thinking, which is based on our specific culturally derived norms and viewpoints. We cannot maintain System 2 thinking for long or we would not be able to keep up the the dynamics of conversation and natural human interaction. At some point, we need to return to our comfort zone that lies in our unconsciousness. Thus, it can be argued that just getting by in a particular cross-cultural context may have a more negative impact in the long run because the cross-cultural participant may: 1) perceive communication using only their System 1 native culture based interpretations or 2) activate System 2 to in order to get by and adapt in the moment but risk missing important stimuli so that the intended message can be interpreted as intended. Herein lies the paradox. If we are unaware of specific cultural triggers, we may not notice them and risk misinterpretation via our native culture. Further, if we are aware of the bias trigger, we tend to switch into a slower more focused way of thinking and communicating which in turn may slow communication efficiency and interaction and cause us to miss other important stimuli. A culture based trigger may be verbal or nonverbal behavior. For example, to the Japanese speaker, a slight tilt of the head to the left or right signals to the speaker that the listener does not understand or is unsure of the speaker's utterance. These types of subtle culture-based nonverbal cues typically go unnoticed to the native English speaker who is not culturally conditioned to recognize this non-verbal stimuli. Understanding how hidden biases are formed can help us better predict problematic areas in both intercultural and intracultural communication.

## 5. Hidden Bias Problems

Benson (September 2016) organizes cognitive biases into four problems. The first problem concerns having too much information or stimuli for our brains to process at one time. We live in a complex world filled with stimuli that threatens to overload our senses if we do not aggressively filter out what we believe is most important. As described before, we tend to follow the path of least resistance when we are unconsciously making decisions. Cognitive biases such as *blind spots* (Banaji and Greenwald 2013), *anchoring* or *availability heuristic* (see Khaneman and Tversky, 1974) are activated to help us filter and interpret important information. In intercultural communication it is not unusual for two speakers from different cultural backgrounds to experience the same stimuli but have a different interpretation of it. This is due to the ingrained cultural value systems that teach us what cultural norms to ignore and what to pay attention to. For example, you may notice that it is much easier to



## Cultural Bias in Intercultural Communication

spot flaws in someone who is deviating from the norm (e.g. has a foreign accent, doesn't shake hands etc). These cultural blind spot biases can become dangerous when we judge them as strange simply because they are different from our norm.

Another problem concerns not having enough meaning. We unconsciously fill-in the gaps of missing knowledge based on personal beliefs and past experience. This leads to *stereotyping* and is probably the most harmful cross-cultural hidden bias. Social psychologists (see Tversky and Kahneman 1974) have attempted to describe how the process of simplification in thinking works. They have labeled it as *intuitive heuristics* - taking mental shortcuts in order to solve complex, time-consuming tasks in an efficient manner. When we are faced with a complex question that takes mental effort we tend to default to our existing schema so that we can justify or simplify to answer the question. Psychologists use intuitive heuristics to explain how when we are, "faced with a difficult question, we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noticing the substitution" (Kahneman, 2011, p. 12). If the default schemata differ between two culturally diverse speakers, then it is easy to imagine that the easier question being answered would also differ.

*In-group, out-group biases* tend to be stronger in high context cultures than low context cultures. This does not mean people who do this are necessarily unfairly biased or wrongly stereotyping however. High context cultures find greater meaning in in-group contexts than out which helps them communicate more efficiently albeit with more ambiguity. Not having enough meaning allows us to continue with System 1 thinking to interpret complex cultural behavior. This makes it much easier to draw what Hofstede calls "moral circles" around those in our in-group to help us delineate those who have "full rights and obligations" (2010, p. 12).

"Culture is about how to be a good member of the moral circle, depending on one's personal or ascribed properties, about what to do if people are bad, and about whom to consider for admission" (Hofstede et. al 2010, p. 14).

The moral circle also provides an in-group, out-group dichotomy that makes it easier to discriminate and stereotype. In extreme examples such as in war time, it becomes much easier to objectify the enemy and justify killing if they are outside our moral circle.

Another cognitive bias problem is being required to act fast on the information we are

presented with in real-time communication. Like the first problem of too much information, information that comes too quickly overloads our ability to assimilate it and function. We therefore must rely on biases from previous experience. For example, with *status quo bias*, we stay focused by favoring information that is immediate and relatable as opposed to distant and delayed. Or *information bias* when we favor the simple option over a complex or ambiguous one. Humans have a constant need to simplify in order to interpret a dynamic, fluid flow of external stimuli. But, humans as a product of their cultural values, treat different types of information differently via their cultural schemata. Japanese, for instance, tend to avoid singling out individual achievements in group contexts in order to maintain social hierarchy and harmony. Thus, status quo bias will have a different default for a high context culture such as Japan compared to lower context oriented cultures.

The final bias problem concerns memory. Of our daily ongoing life experiences, what should be remembered? Research shows that our own memories can be confused by *cognitive bias* (Khaneman 2011, p. 9). We often reinforce our memories afterwards with false memories (*false memory bias*) or reduce them to key elements for easier recall (*primacy effect*). Loftus and Pickrell (1995) study on false memory found that people can be led to remember detailed events that never actually happened to them. This can have profound implications for the legal system. We store memories based on how they were experienced (*Google effect*). Good memories are typically easier to recall. But remember that it is easier for two people from disparate cultures to interpret the same experience differently (*i.e. cultural bias*) simply because their cultural norms and values shape their world views in different ways. For instance, high context, high power cultures may tend to recall the effect their behavior had on their social group whereas someone raised in a low context, low power culture will recall how they felt or reacted individually.

## 6. Discussion

Communication is a complex process of meaning making based on background knowledge formed through experiences. For effective communication and long term success in dealing with people from other cultures, good intentions are not enough. Getting by in the short-term is at best a minimization of differences. To move from minimization to acceptance and, finally, to integration on the Intercultural Sensitivity Model (Bennett 2011), requires having an awareness of the cultural biases we make so that we can adapt and empathize with others from unique cultural backgrounds. This can be done by challenging our assumptions

## Cultural Bias in Intercultural Communication

through intercultural training and education or by long term immersion in the target culture. It is clear that hidden biases have both positive and negative effects on the communication process and behavior regardless of cultural background. However, national culture gives us a unique default position to fill-in the blanks via our cultural schemata. This helps us communicate more smoothly with others in our same cultural community but at the same time making it more difficult to recognize the assumptions we make when communicating with someone from outside our culture. Thus, at the cognitive level, a paradox exists of knowing when to switch between unconscious automatic thinking (System 1) of our native cultural norms and an active more mindful thinking (System 2) to recognize others' cultural norms. There is a strong need for more research to be done in the area of problematic culturally specific biases in consequential cross-cultural contexts such as diplomacy, education and health care. Investigating hidden biases in culture based communication, reminds us how challenging it is to share the same meaning in cross-cultural communication whether we realize it or not.

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## Cultural Bias in Intercultural Communication

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## Abstract

Intercultural understanding and sensitivity exists on a continuum from denial to integration in Bennett's Intercultural Sensitivity Model (2011). It is not uncommon for someone to assume that if they have an open mind or good intentions that they can communicate effectively cross-culturally. Although this may help us get by in the short term, minimizing the differences between cultural groups simply applies the same rule to everyone and is a form of ethnocentrism resulting in a disregard for different world views and experiences. Possibly the best way to achieve better long term outcomes and integration of cultural differences is by immersing ourselves in the target culture itself. Unfortunately, this is not possible for most people. The most practicable way, therefore, is through intercultural training and study of how cultural biases are formed and affect cross-cultural communication. In this paper, we shall discuss several hidden biases that are created by cultural schema and how they can be problematic in cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: culture, schema, bias, intercultural, communication