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COMMUNICATING  
WITH STRANGERS

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AN APPROACH  
TO INTERCULTURAL  
COMMUNICATION

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## COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS: An Approach to Intercultural Communication

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## Introduction

*Greetings. I am pleased to see that we are different.  
May we together become greater than the sum of both of us.*  
Vulcan Greeting (*Star Trek*)

In the past, most human beings were born, lived, and died within a limited geographical area, never encountering people of other races and/or cultural backgrounds. Such an existence, however, no longer prevails in the world. Even members of once isolated groups of people like the Tasadays in the Philippines now frequently have contact with members of other cultural groups. McLuhan (1962) characterizes today's world as a "global village" because of the rapid expansion of worldwide transportation and communication networks (e.g., airplanes, communication satellites, and telephones). It is now possible for any person from an industrialized country to communicate with any person in another industrialized country within minutes by phone, fax, or videoconference, and within hours, face-to-face. In fact, we are at a point in history when important or interesting events, such as wars, presidential debates in the United States, major sporting events, and royal weddings in one country, often are transmitted simultaneously to more than 100 different countries.

The expansion of worldwide communication networks, combined with increases in travel for pleasure or business and in international migration of refugees, heightens our awareness of the need for understanding other cultures and their people. The work of the Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (1979) illustrates this increased awareness. In its final report to the president of the United States, the commission points out that

nothing less is at issue than the nation's security. At a time when the resurgent forces of nationalism and of ethnic and linguistic consciousness so directly affect global realities, the United States requires far more reliable capacities to communicate with its allies, analyze the behavior of potential adversaries, and earn the trust and sympathies of the uncommitted. Yet there is a widening gap between these needs and the [North] American competence to understand and deal successfully with other peoples in a world in a flux. (pp. 1–2)

The problems isolated by the presidential commission in 1979 are even more important today. The commission set forth a number of recommendations in order for the people of the United States to understand and deal successfully with other peoples of the world, including increased foreign language instruction, more international educational exchanges, citizen education in international affairs, and increases in international training for business and government personnel. Central to most of the commission's recommendations is the need for an increased awareness and understanding of communication between people from different cultures.

In a world of international interdependence, the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from other cultures takes on extreme urgency. The need for intercultural understanding, however, does not begin or end with national boundaries. Within any nation, a multitude of racial and ethnic groups exist, and their members interact daily. Legislation and legal rulings in the United States on affirmative action, school busing, and desegregation underscore the importance of nondiscriminatory contact between members of different groups. The importance of good intergroup relations also is apparent when current demographic trends are examined. It is projected, for example, that in the near future, the workplace will change from a place dominated by European American (i.e., white) males to a place dominated by women, immigrants, and non-European American (i.e., nonwhite) ethnics (Hudson Institute, 1987). For work to be accomplished effectively in the multicultural organization, people of different groups need to understand one another's patterns of communication.

It is recognized widely that one of the characteristics separating humans from other animals is our development of culture. The development of human culture is made possible through communication, and it is through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that Hall (1959) maintains that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." In other words, we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms. Because we learn the language, rules, and norms of our culture by a very early age (between five and ten years of age), however, we generally are unaware of how culture influences our behavior in general and our communication in particular.

When we communicate with people from other cultures, we often are confronted with languages, rules, and norms different from our own. Confronting these differences can be a source of insight into the rules and norms of our own culture,

as well as a source of frustration or gratification. Although the presence of cultural differences may suggest the need for accommodation in our communication, it cannot be taken automatically as either a barrier to or a facilitator of effective communication (Ellingsworth, 1977). Communication between people from different cultures can be as effective as communication between people from the same culture (Taylor & Simard, 1975). In other words, communicating with a person from another culture may be either easier or more difficult than communicating with someone from the same culture.

One of the major factors influencing our effectiveness in communicating with people from other cultures is our ability to understand their cultures. It is impossible to understand the communication of people from other cultures if we are highly ethnocentric. Sumner (1940) characterizes ethnocentrism as the “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (p. 27). Ethnocentrism leads us to see our own culture’s ways of doing things as “right” and all others as “wrong.” While the tendency to make judgments according to our own cultural standards is natural, it hinders our understanding of other cultures and the patterns of communication of their people. Becoming more culturally relativistic, on the other hand, can be conducive to understanding.

Cultural relativism suggests that the only way we can understand the behavior of others is in the context of their culture. Herskovits (1973) says behaviors must be understood “relative to the cultural background out of which they arise” (p. 14). No one cultural trait is “right” or “wrong”; it is merely “different” from alternative cultural traits. This is not to say we must never make value judgments of people in other cultures. Making them is often necessary. Postponing such value judgments, or recognizing their tentative nature, until adequate information is gathered and we understand the people from the other culture, however, greatly facilitates understanding and effective communication.

The purpose of this book is to provide the conceptual tools needed to understand culture, communication, the ways in which culture influences communication, and the process of communication between people from different cultures. Such knowledge is extremely important. In fact, it is necessary if we are to comprehend fully the daily events of today’s multicultural world. The concepts discussed should help you better understand your communication with people from other cultures as well as international situations such as the holding of United States diplomats in Iran. Understanding the material presented also should help you not only analyze your intercultural encounters in order to determine where misunderstandings occur, but also determine how such misunderstandings can be minimized in future interactions.

Given this brief introduction, we define what we mean when we use the terms communication, culture, and intercultural communication. In the next section, we outline the assumptions we make about the nature of communication. Following that presentation, we examine the concept of culture and develop a working definition for intercultural communication. We conclude this chapter by presenting our plan for the book.

## CONCEPTUALIZING COMMUNICATION

Everyone communicates and has a preconceived notion of what communication is and how it takes place. Our purpose here is to specify our preconceived notions about the nature of communication. It is not necessary for you to agree with our conceptualization; however, while reading the remainder of the book, remember that we take the ideas expressed here for granted. Because we take these ideas for granted, we present them as assumptions.

### Assumption 1: Communication Is a Symbolic Activity

Communication involves the use of symbols. *Symbols* are things used to stand for, or represent, something else. Symbols are not limited to words; they also include nonverbal displays and objects (e.g., the flag). Virtually anything can be a symbol—written words, spoken words, gestures, facial expressions, flags, and so forth. Symbols have referents, or things they symbolize. A red light at an intersection, for example, symbolizes “stop.” The important thing to remember is that symbols are symbols only because a group of people agree to consider them as such. There is not a natural connection between symbols and their referents; the relationships are arbitrary and vary from culture to culture. Bram (1955) points out that

the relationship between symbols and the “things” which they symbolize is not a self-evident or natural one. . . . Symbols derive their specific function from group consensus or social convention and have no effect whatever (outside their rather trivial physical characteristics) on any person not acquainted with such consensus or convention. (p. 2)

Symbols are symbols because a group of people have agreed on their common usage.

One of the defining characteristics of a culture is the agreement among the people who share a culture on the general meaning of symbols. This general agreement does not imply, however, that all members of a culture share a common meaning for any given symbol. The meaning we attach to a symbol is a function of our culture, our ethnic group, our family, and our unique individual experiences. Two people *never* attach exactly the same meaning to a specific symbol. Within a culture, nevertheless, there is sufficient agreement so that people can communicate with relative clarity on most topics of communication.

It is the human ability to use symbols that makes possible the development of speech and language and the capacity to deal with relationships among people and objects in the absence of those people and objects. The meanings of symbols are learned through the process of socialization, the process of learning to be a member of our culture. Symbols may take on different meanings in different situations. In that respect, symbols differ from signs. Signs are concrete and fixed regardless of context (Dance, 1982). When a person shows a dog the palm of the hand, for example, that sign means “down” regardless of where the gesture is used.

## Assumption 2: Communication Is a Process Involving the Transmitting and Interpreting of Messages

Since it is impossible to transmit electrical impulses directly from one person's brain to that of another person, it is necessary for us to put our ideas into codes that can be transmitted, either verbally or nonverbally. *Transmitting messages* refers to the process of putting our thoughts, feelings, emotions, or attitudes, for example, into a form recognizable by others. The symbols used may be written, verbal, nonverbal, mathematical, or musical, to cite only a few possibilities. We refer to the transmitted set of symbols as a message. *Interpreting messages* is the process of perceiving, or making sense of, incoming messages and stimuli from the environment.

The way that we transmit and interpret messages is influenced by our background—our culture, our ethnicity, our family upbringing—and our unique individual experiences (including our experiences with others and the emotions we have felt). Since no two people have exactly the same background or individual experiences, no two people transmit or interpret messages in the same way.

Messages can be transmitted from one person to another; *meanings cannot*. Since meanings are not determined solely by the message, the net result of any communication is a partial difference between the meanings held by the communicators. In other words, the meaning of the message one person transmits is never exactly the same as the meaning another person interprets. "To say that meaning in communication is never totally the same for all communicators is not to say that communication is impossible or even difficult—only that it is imperfect" (Fisher, 1978, p. 257).

The transmission and interpretation of messages are not static activities. We transmit and interpret messages at the same time. We interpret other people's messages at the same time we transmit messages to them. We may change what we are saying because of our interpretation of other people's messages while we are talking.

The fact that we transmit and interpret messages at the same time suggests that communication is a process. Berlo (1960) points out if we conceptualize communication as a *process*, "we view events and relationships as dynamic, on-going, ever-changing, continuous. . . . we also mean that it does not have a beginning, an end, a fixed sequence of events. It is not static, at rest. It is moving. The ingredients within a process interact: each affects all of the others" (p. 24). Viewing communication as a process, therefore, allows for recognition of its continuity, complexity, unrepeatability, and irreversibility.

## Assumption 3: Communication Involves the Creation of Meaning

As indicated earlier, messages can be transmitted from one person to another, but meanings cannot. One of the reasons we cannot transmit meanings is the ambiguity inherent in the language we speak. Ortega y Gasset (1957) points out that

man [or woman] when he [or she] sets himself [or herself] to speak, does so because he [or she] believes that he [or she] will be able to say what he [or she] thinks. Now, this is an illusion. Language is not up to that. It says more or less, a part of what we think, and raises an impenetrable obstacle to the transmission of the rest. It serves quite well for mathematical statements and proofs. . . . But in proportion as conversation treats of more important, more human, more “real” subjects than these, its vagueness, clumsiness, and confusion steadily increases. Obedient to the inveterate prejudice that “talking leads to understanding,” we speak and listen in such good faith that we end by misunderstanding one another far more than if we remained mute and set ourselves to divine each other. Nay, more: since our thought is in large measure dependent on our language. (p. 245)

We also cannot transmit meanings because the meanings we attach to messages are a transaction among the message itself, such as what is said and how it is said; the channel used, such as whether the message was spoken or written; the situation in which the message is transmitted, for example, in an office or in a home; the people who transmit and interpret it; and the interaction that is taking place between the individuals.

The channel used to transmit a message influences how we interpret the message. A message transmitted face-to-face using the spoken word may be interpreted differently if it is said exactly the same way on a telephone answering machine. An order from the boss written in memo form will be interpreted differently from the same words given in person with a pleasant tone of voice. Similarly, messages transmitted over computer-mediated networks may be expressed differently from messages in handwritten letters or from those transmitted face-to-face. Computer-mediated messages, for example, make it easier to express anger. One manager reports that “before [computers], if I was really angry, it took time to find the person and vent my anger. A lot of the times I cooled down. . . . Now, I can just hit a button and in a matter of 30 seconds, send hate mail to dozens of people” (Scott, 1993, p. A33).

The situation in which a message is transmitted also influences its interpretation. The same message transmitted in two different locations might be interpreted very differently. If, for instance, we have a friend who is a physician and she or he says “How are you?” we will interpret the message one way at a party and another in the physician’s office.

The situation also influences the degree to which we must elaborate our messages in order to be understood. Sometimes we must use concrete language and complete sentences to be understood. At other times, this type of elaboration is not necessary. In communicating with close friends in an informal situation, for example, we may use shorthand speech and slang. We would not, however, use the same speech patterns in our place of work when talking to our supervisor. At work we would use formal language.

The people involved in any particular encounter also influence the interpretation of the messages exchanged. If we know other people, we use our knowledge of them in interpreting their messages. If we do not know others, we use our stereotypes of their group memberships (our mental image of the groups) in interpreting

their messages. The culture, ethnic group, social class, and age of the people involved influence how we interpret their messages.

Meanings also emerge out of the interaction that occurs. We always interpret other people's messages in terms of the messages they have transmitted to us during the same encounter and in terms of the messages we have transmitted to them during the same encounter. If it appears that we are attaching meanings to messages that differ from those of the person with whom we are communicating, we can negotiate a new meaning with that person. To illustrate, suppose you are having a conversation with a friend and you say, "My partner thinks that we should take a short trip over the weekend." You are using the word *partner* to refer to your romantic partner. If your friend says, "I didn't know you had a business," you would know there was a misunderstanding, and you could correct the problem by telling your friend that "partner" refers to the person you are dating.

To decrease our chances of misinterpreting other people's messages, we must be aware of how misinterpretations occur. Misinterpretations occur because:

- (1) We can never know the state of mind—the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings—of other people.
- (2) We depend on [messages], which are frequently ambiguous, to inform us about the attitudes and wishes of other people.
- (3) We use our own coding system, which may be defective, to decipher these [messages].
- (4) Depending on our state of mind at a particular time, we may be biased in our method of interpreting other people's behavior . . . .
- (5) The degree to which we believe that we are correct in divining another person's motives and attitudes is not related to the actual accuracy of our belief. (Beck, 1988, p. 18)

Many of the ideas discussed throughout this book are designed to help us improve the accuracy of our interpretations and, in turn, improve the quality of our communication.

When we communicate, we present ourselves as we want others to see us and respond to how others present themselves to us. We modify how we see ourselves on the basis of the feedback we receive from others. If others consistently tell us we are incompetent, for example, we begin to see ourselves as incompetent. Through communication we can facilitate others' personal growth or destroy them. Gerbner (1978) refers to the latter possibility as "symbolic annihilation."

### **Assumption 4: Communication Takes Place at Varying Levels of Awareness**

As we are socialized into our culture, we learn much of our behavior unconsciously. Learning to walk is a good illustration. No one told us how to walk. We just did it and, through trial and error, eventually mastered it. Much of our communication behavior was learned the same way. Because we learned much of it unconsciously, we are not usually aware of our behavior when we communicate.

A large amount of our social interaction occurs at very low levels of awareness (e.g., Abelson, 1976; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Langer, 1978, 1989). These writers argue, and we concur, that we behave with low levels of awareness in situations we consider “normal,” or routine.

When our communication is routine, it is based on our implicit theories of communication. Our *implicit personal theories of communication* are our unconscious, taken-for-granted assumptions about communication. As human beings, we “construct theories about social reality. [Our] theories have all of the features of the formal theories constructed by scientists. They employ concepts and relationships derived from observation; they provide a structure through which social reality is observed; they enable [us] to make predictions” about how other people will communicate with us (Wegner & Vallacher, 1977, p. 21). We are not, however, highly aware of the theories we use to guide our behavior.

Since we are not aware that we are using implicit, unconscious theories to guide our behavior, we do not question our theories or think about how they can be modified. Not questioning our implicit theories leads us to assume that the predictions we make about other people’s behavior (based on our implicit theories) are accurate. The predictions we make based on our implicit theories, however, are not always accurate. To be able to improve our accuracy in predicting other people’s behavior, we must become aware of the implicit theories we use to guide our behavior and think about how they can be improved.

Our implicit theories tell us with whom we should communicate, when we should communicate with others, what we should communicate, how we should communicate with others, how we should present ourselves when we communicate, what effective communication is, and how to interpret other people’s communication behavior. Because we learned our implicit personal theories of communication as we were growing up and as we live our lives, our theories are based on the culture in which we were raised, our ethnic background, our gender, our social class, the region of the country in which we were raised, as well as on our unique individual experiences.

When we encounter new or novel situations, we become aware of our behavior (our behavior is enacted consciously). One difference to be expected between our communication with people from our own culture and people from other cultures, therefore, is the level of awareness we have of our behavior. We are more aware of our behavior with people who are from other cultures than we are of our behavior with people from our own culture. Our awareness is heightened because interaction with people from other cultures is less routine; it involves new and novel situations.

### **Assumption 5: Communicators Make Predictions About the Outcomes of Their Communication Behavior**

Miller and Steinberg (1975) argue that “when people communicate, they make predictions about the effects, or outcomes, of their communication behaviors; that is, they choose among various communicative strategies on the basis of how the person receiving the message will respond” (p. 7). They go on to recognize that our

communication behaviors, including our predictions, are not always conscious. Miller and Steinberg suggest that our awareness of making predictions varies with the degree to which we are aware of alternative outcomes for the situation in which we find ourselves. The more aware we are of alternative outcomes, the more aware we are of making predictions. When our behavior is unconscious (outside of our awareness), generally we are not aware of making predictions. When our behavior is conscious, we are more aware of the predictions we make.

When we feel that others' behavior is predictable, we feel that there is rhythm to our interactions with them. We need to feel that there is a rhythm to our interactions with others to feel comfortable interacting with them (Turner, 1988). The rhythm we expect to take place varies depending on the context of our interaction. We expect one kind of predictability when we interact with a server in a restaurant, and another when we are talking with a close friend. When other people's behavior is not predictable, we feel anxiety.

If we do not feel a part of the interaction taking place, we will have a difficult time seeing other people's behavior as predictable. Our cultural, ethnic, and gender identities provide us with implicit predictions about other people's behavior. The categories in which we place others (e.g., based on their culture, ethnicity, age) also provide us with implicit predictions of their behaviors. When we categorize others, our stereotypes of the groups (e.g., the traits we associate with the groups) in which we categorize them are activated. Our stereotypes provide predictions of other people's behavior, and our interactions will appear to have rhythm if other people conform to our stereotypes. If other people do not follow our stereotypes, our interaction with them will seem as if it lacks rhythm.

Predictability tends to increase as relationships become more intimate (we have more predictability about friends than acquaintances), but within a specific relationship predictability fluctuates over time. There is a dialectic between predictability and novelty. We need both predictability *and* novelty to maintain our relationships. Predictability is necessary to know how to expect other people to behave, but novelty is needed to keep our relationships interesting and to facilitate effective communication. When we are not conscious of our communication behavior, however, we may focus exclusively on our need for predictability and ignore our need for novelty.

## **Assumption 6: Intention Is Not a Necessary Condition for Communication**

*Intentions* are instructions we give ourselves about how to communicate (Triandis, 1977). When we think about what we want to do in a particular situation (i.e., engage in cognitive activity), we form intentions. Intention, therefore, is a cognitive construct—it is part of our thought processes. We may not be able to accomplish our intentions, however. Our intention, for example, may be to be nonjudgmental in our interactions with others, but in actuality we may be very judgmental.

Our assumption is derived from Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson's (1967) first axiom of communication: "one cannot not communicate" (p. 51, emphasis

deleted). The basis for this axiom is that any behavior, or the absence of any behavior, communicates something if there is someone in the environment to notice the behavior, or its absence. In making this assumption, we are not contending all behavior is communication; rather, communication occurs any time one person attributes meaning to his or her own or another person's behavior. Taking this view implies it is not necessary for a person to transmit a message intentionally in order to communicate. Many intercultural misunderstandings, in fact, are due to the unintentional behavior of a person from one culture being perceived, interpreted, and reacted to by a person from another culture. In other words, behavior that is not meant to communicate is interpreted by another person and influences the messages that person sends.

It is important to recognize that intentions are only one source of our communication behavior. Our communication behavior also can be based on two other sources, habits or emotions (Triandis, 1977). We engage in much of our communication behavior out of habit. We have learned scripts that we enact in particular situations. *Scripts* are predetermined courses of action we have learned. The greeting ritual is one example. The ritual for greeting others reduces the vast amount of uncertainty and anxiety present in initial interactions to manageable portions, and allows us to interact with others as though there was relatively little uncertainty or anxiety. The norms and rules for the ritual provide us with predictions about how others will respond in the situation. When someone deviates from the script or we enter a new situation, we cannot fall back on the rituals' implicit predictions. Under those circumstances, we have to reduce our uncertainty and anxiety before we can make accurate predictions and communicate effectively.

Our communication behavior also can be based on our affect, feelings, or emotions. We often react to others on a strictly emotional basis. If we feel we were criticized, for example, we may become defensive and strike out at the other person without thinking. We can, however, manage our emotional reactions cognitively. Our communication behavior can be based on any one of these three sources or on some combination.

### **Assumption 7: Every Communication Message Has a Content Dimension and a Relationship Dimension**

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) argue that every communication message can be interpreted on two levels: what is said (the content level), and how it is said (the relationship level). The content level specifies the substance of the message, while the relationship level indicates how the substance is to be interpreted. The relationship dimension is "only rarely defined deliberately or with full awareness" (p. 52); it is, therefore, usually transmitted and interpreted unconsciously. The content level usually is transmitted verbally, while the relationship level tends to be transmitted nonverbally. A student, for example, can say "I want to discuss my grade" to a professor, but the tone of voice will tell the professor whether it is going to be a friendly discussion or a hostile encounter.

The way we communicate offers a definition of the relationship between us. The children's saying "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never

hurt me” is not accurate. The words we choose and the way we say them to others can and do hurt others and our relationship with them. As we show later, cultures vary with respect to the emphasis they place on the content and the relationship levels of messages.

### **Assumption 8: Communicators Impose Structure on Their Interactions**

Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson’s (1967) third axiom states that “the nature of a relationship is contingent upon the punctuation of the communicational sequences between the communicants” (p. 59, emphasis deleted). *Punctuation of the sequence of events* means the grouping of elements into a recognizable pattern, or the imposition of structure on the communication process. Without this grouping of elements, or imposition of structure, interaction would be uninterpretable. People not only impose a beginning and an ending on a sequence of events but also interpret a particular event as being a “cause” or an “effect” of their behavior. A husband, for example, may say he drinks (an effect) because his wife always works late (a cause). The wife, in contrast, may say she works late (an effect) because her husband drinks (a cause).

Every time we communicate, we impose structure on the process. “Culturally, we share many conventions of punctuation which, while no more or less accurate than other views of the same events, serve to organize common and important interactional sequences” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 56). When communicating with people from our own culture, we usually are safe in assuming that the structure we impose is roughly the same as the one they impose. When communicating with people from another culture, however, we must determine how they impose structure on the process of communication if we are to interpret and predict their behavior accurately.

In summary, the assumptions outlined above present a relatively clear picture of how we view communication. We elaborate on our conceptualization in the next chapter, but the above specification of our assumptions is sufficient to demonstrate what we mean by communication. Those aspects of our assumptions necessary for delimiting communication are as follows: (1) it is a symbolic activity; (2) it is a process; (3) it involves the transmitting and interpreting of messages; (4) it involves creating meaning; (5) it takes place at varying levels of conscious awareness; and (6) intention is not necessary for it to take place.

### **Uncertainty and Anxiety**

We communicate for many reasons. We communicate to inform someone about something, to entertain another person, to change another person’s attitudes or behavior, and to reinforce our view of ourselves, to name only a few of the possibilities. No matter what our reason is for communicating, we always experience some degree of uncertainty (a cognitive response, or a response involving our thoughts)

and anxiety (an affective, or emotional, response). High levels of uncertainty and anxiety inhibit effective communication.

Interacting with people from other cultures and/or ethnic groups is a novel situation for most people. Novel situations are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and anxiety. “The immediate psychological result of being in a new situation is lack of security. Ignorance of the potentialities inherent in the situation, of the means to reach a goal, and of the probable outcomes of an intended action causes insecurity” (Herman & Schield, 1960, p. 165). Attempts to deal with the ambiguity of new situations involves a pattern of information seeking (uncertainty reduction) and tension (anxiety) reduction (Ball-Rokeach, 1973).

*Uncertainty* refers to our inability to predict or explain others’ behavior, feelings, attitudes, or values (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). When we reduce uncertainty about others and ourselves, understanding is possible. Understanding involves obtaining information, knowing, comprehending, and interpreting. Three levels of understanding can be differentiated: description, prediction, and explanation (Berger et al., 1976). Description involves specifying what is observed in terms of its physical attributes (i.e., drawing a picture in words). Prediction involves projecting what will happen in a particular situation, while explanation involves stating why something occurred.

We make predictions and create explanations all the time when we communicate. We rarely describe others’ behavior, however. When we communicate with others, we typically interpret messages by attaching meaning directly to them. We do not stop to describe what we saw or heard before we interpret it. Rather, we interpret messages as we perceive them. The problem is that we base our interpretations on our life experiences, culture, or ethnic group memberships. Since our life experiences differ from the other person’s, our interpretations of the other person’s behavior may be incorrect. Incorrect interpretations often lead to misunderstandings.

*Anxiety* refers to the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen. It is an affective (i.e., emotional) response, not a cognitive response as is uncertainty. While uncertainty results from our inability to predict others’ behavior, “anxiety stems from the anticipation of negative consequences. People fear at least four types of negative consequences: psychological or behavioral consequences for the self, and negative evaluations by members of the outgroup and the ingroup” (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 159).

Our ingroups are groups with which we identify that are important to us (Triandis, 1988). If we define our religious group as important and identify with being members of our religion, for example, our religious group is one of our ingroups. Other religious groups then become outgroups for us. We may, however, identify with many ingroups. When we interact with another person, we categorize that person by placing her or him into an ingroup or an outgroup. We experience more uncertainty and anxiety when we communicate with members of outgroups than when we communicate with members of ingroups.

Many other factors affect the amount of uncertainty and anxiety we experience in a particular situation. The degree to which we are familiar with the situa-

tion and know how to behave, the expectations we have for our own and others' behavior, and the degree to which we perceive ourselves to be similar to the other person, for example, influence our levels of uncertainty and anxiety. Our ability to reduce our uncertainty and anxiety, in turn, influences the degree to which we can communicate effectively.

We do not mean to imply that we want to reduce our uncertainty and anxiety totally when we communicate with strangers. Low levels of uncertainty and anxiety are not functional. If anxiety is too low, we do not care enough to perform well. If uncertainty is too low, there is little "mystery" and we get bored. Moderate levels of uncertainty and anxiety are desirable for effective communication and adaptation to new environments (Gudykunst, 1995). We examine uncertainty and anxiety in more detail in Chapter 2.

## CONCEPTUALIZING CULTURE

*Culture* is a term that means many different things to different people. Some writers discuss culture in terms that suggest it is the same as society, while others define it in such a way that they can talk about male and female cultures. In order to clarify our conceptualization of culture, we will take a brief digression into the more general study of social organization. Through an understanding of social organization, we will generate a working definition for culture.

### The Process of Social Organization

The study of social organization is concerned with the way in which human activity is coordinated or organized. Olsen (1978) contends that social life is "a process that is continually being created and recreated as individuals bring order and meaning to their collective social life" (p. 4). In other words, like communication, social life is a dynamic, ongoing process without a beginning or an end.

Social organization cannot come about unless some degree of "order" exists. Olsen (1978) differentiates three levels of ordering involved in social life: personal, social, and cultural. *Personal ordering* refers to the process that "gives coherence and stability to the various cognitive and affective psychological processes occurring within an individual" (p. 7). This level of ordering takes place within us as our minds bring together our feelings, attitudes, and needs into a coherent whole, which we call a personality.

For *social ordering* to exist, two or more individuals must interact with each other over time. Social interaction occurs whenever the behavior of one person influences another person's thoughts and/or behavior (Olsen, 1978). As individuals interact over time, ongoing social relationships are formed among them. When these patterns of behavior become stable, we can say social ordering takes place. Social ordering therefore "grows out of the interactions and relationships of individuals as these activities become patterned and recurrent through time" (Olsen, 1978, p. 7).

Obviously, different levels of social ordering occur. When two people interact for an extended period of time and their behavior becomes patterned, for example, one form of social ordering takes place (a friendship is formed). Similarly, when a man and a woman get married and have children and interact on a daily basis, their behavior becomes patterned and another type of social ordering occurs (a family). Furthermore, when people within some geographical area interact over time and their behavior becomes patterned, we again can say that social ordering develops (a society is “born”). If a group of people interact together over time and their behavior becomes patterned (i.e., social ordering has taken place), they develop shared agreements about how to interpret the world they inhabit. In other words, patterned and recurrent social interactions “give rise to shared sets of cultural ideas that symbolize, reflect and give meaning to the social order” (Olsen, 1978, p. 163).

*Cultural ordering* involves the development of a set of shared symbolic ideas associated with patterns of social ordering. Any group that develops social ordering also displays cultural ordering. Cultural ordering is associated not only with large collectivities (such as nations) but also with smaller collectivities (such as ethnic groups and families) that interact on an ongoing basis. To the extent collectivities are interrelated or overlap with each other, they share cultural ideas (Olsen, 1978).

## A Working Definition for Culture

Olsen’s (1978) analysis of the process of social organization specifies how cultural ordering emerges, but it does not adequately define culture. We use Keesing’s (1974) definition of culture. His definition is long, but not overly technical:

Culture, conceived as a system of competence shared in its broad design and deeper principles, and varying between individuals in its specificities, is then not all of what an individual knows and thinks and feels about his [or her] world. It is his [or her] theory of what his [or her] fellows know, believe, and mean, his [or her] theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he [or she] was born. . . . It is this theory to which a native actor [or actress] refers in interpreting the unfamiliar or the ambiguous, in interacting with strangers (or supernaturals), and in other settings peripheral to the familiarity of mundane everyday life space; and with which he [or she] creates the stage on which the games of life are played. . . . But note that the actor’s [or actress’s] “theory” of his [or her] culture, like his [or her] theory of his [or her] language may be in large measure unconscious. Actors [or actresses] follow rules of which they are not consciously aware, and assume a world to be “out there” that they have in fact created with culturally shaped and shaded patterns of mind. We can recognize that not every individual shares precisely the same theory of the cultural code, that not every individual knows all the sectors of the culture . . . no one native actor [or actress] knows all the culture, and each has a variant version of the code. Culture in this view is ordered not simply as a collection of symbols fitted together by the analyst but as a system of knowledge, shaped and constrained by the way the human brain acquires, organizes, and processes information and creates “internal models of reality.” (p. 89)

This definition suggests that culture is our theory of the “game being played” in our society. We use our theory of the game being played in interacting with the other people we encounter. It tells us how to communicate with others and how to interpret their behavior. We generally are not highly aware of the rules of the game being played, but we behave as though there is general agreement on the rules.

We learn to be members of our culture from our parents, from teachers in schools, from our religious institutions, from our peers, and from the mass media. Originally, we learn about our culture from our parents. Our parents begin to teach us the norms and communication rules that guide behavior in our culture. Norms are guidelines with a basis in morality for how we should behave or how we should not behave. Rules, in contrast, are guidelines for the ways we are expected to communicate. Rules are not based in morality (Olsen, 1978). Our parents do not explicitly tell us the norms and rules of our culture. They do not, for example, tell us that when we meet someone for the first time, we should stick out our right hands and shake three times. Rather, they teach us the norms and rules by modeling how to behave and correcting us when we violate a norm or rule.

Once we are old enough to interact with other children, they reinforce the norms and rules we learned from our parents. We also learn additional norms and rules of our culture from them. We learn from our peers, for example, how to be cooperative and how to compete with others. When we attend religious services or school, we learn other norms and rules of our culture. The other way we learn about our culture is through the mass media, especially television. Television teaches us many of the day-to-day norms of our culture and provides us with a view of reality. Television has become the medium through which most of us learn what others’ expectations are for our behavior. It appears that the more television we watch, the more our views of reality overlap with others’ (Gerbner et al., 1980).

Members of a culture do not all share exactly the same view of their culture (Keesing, 1974). No one member of a culture knows all aspects of the culture, and all members of a culture have a unique view of their culture. The theories that members of a culture share, however, overlap sufficiently so that the members can coordinate their behavior in everyday life. Olsen (1978) points out that

as people communicate the meanings of their actions to each other and work out shared interpretations of activities and definitions of situations, they develop a common culture that is shared by all the participants. Shared culture in turn influences and guides—but does not fully determine—these people’s collective activities by providing them with interpretations of social life, role expectations, common definitions of situations, and social norms. (p. 107)

Since we developed our individual implicit theories of communication while learning to be members of our culture, there is overlap in the implicit personal theories of communication members of the same culture use to guide their behavior.

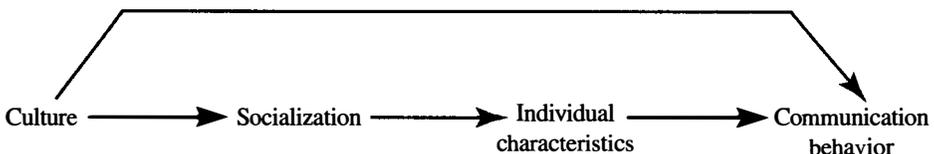
Our culture influences our behavior directly through the norms and rules we use to guide our behavior when we interact with others. Our culture also indirectly affects our communication through the individual characteristics we learn when we are socialized into our culture. As we are socialized into our culture, we learn how we are expected to view ourselves (e.g., in the United States people learn to think of themselves as unique individuals). The way we view ourselves, in turn, influences the way we communicate. Figure 1.1 provides a visual summary of how culture influences our communication. We discuss this model in detail in Chapter 3 when we focus on culture.

Our culture provides us with a system of knowledge that generally allows us to know how to communicate with other people and how to interpret their behavior (Keesing, 1974). The term *culture* usually is reserved to refer to the systems of knowledge used by relatively large numbers of people (i.e., cultural ordering at the societal level). The boundaries between cultures usually, but not always, coincide with political, or national, boundaries between countries. We can speak, for example, of the culture of the United States, the Mexican culture, the Japanese culture, and so forth.

If the term *culture* is reserved for cultural ordering at the societal level, we need a term to use to refer to cultural ordering at lower levels of social ordering. The term traditionally used for this purpose is *subculture*. A *subculture*, therefore, involves a set of shared symbolic ideas held by a collectivity within a larger society. A subculture's set of cultural ideas generally is derived from the larger (societal) culture but differs in some respect. Although the term *subculture* often is used to refer to racial and/or ethnic groups, there obviously are other types of subcultures. We can, for example, talk about a student subculture, a medical subculture (people who work in medicine), a lower-class subculture, a middle-class subculture, or a business subculture, to name only a few. Each of these groups shares many common cultural ideas with a larger culture but has some that are unique.

Before proceeding, we must point out that we believe that our culture influences our communication and that our communication influences our culture. We focus throughout the remainder of the book, however, on the influence of culture on our communication. This influence is mostly out of our awareness. To communicate effectively with people from other cultures and/or ethnic groups, we must be aware of culture's influence on our communication.

**Figure 1.1** Cultural influences on communication.



## DIFFERENTIATING TERMINOLOGY

Given the preceding conceptualizations of communication and culture, we are now ready to present a working definition for intercultural communication. Putting the two conceptualizations together, we stipulate that *intercultural communication is a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures*. It should be noted that this definition does not suggest communication must be effective in order to be labeled intercultural. When we use the term *intercultural communication*, we are not implying that the communication is either effective or ineffective. Effectiveness is a separate dimension; thus to say that two people engaged in intercultural communication is not to say they understood each other. (In Chapter 10, we examine intercultural effectiveness, which is defined as minimizing misunderstandings when people from different cultures communicate.)

Many terms are used to refer to related aspects of communication. So that there is no confusion concerning how we use these terms and how they are used in the intercultural literature, we must introduce these terms. If intercultural communication refers to communication between people from different cultures, then *intracultural* communication refers to communication between people from the same culture. It should be remembered that we reserve the term *culture* for cultural ordering at the societal level. Thus, if we examine communication between two Japanese *or* between two Germans, we are looking at intracultural communication. On the other hand, if we observe communication *between* a Japanese *and* a German, we are looking at intercultural communication.

It should be noted here that we see the underlying communication processes in intercultural and intracultural communication as being essentially the same. The two forms of communication are not different in kind, only in degree. In other words, the variables influencing intercultural and intracultural communication are the same, but some variables have more of an influence on our communication in one situation than in another. Our ethnocentric attitudes, for example, influence our intercultural communication more than our intracultural communication, but our ethnocentric attitudes also influence our intracultural communication. We differentiate between intracultural and intercultural only for the sake of clarity in communicating with you, not to suggest they are different types of communication.

Another term that needs to be clarified is *cross-cultural*. While this term often is used as a synonym for intercultural, the term *cross-cultural* traditionally implies a comparison of some phenomenon across cultures. If, for example, we examine the use of self-disclosure in Japan *and* Germany, we are making a cross-cultural comparison. If we look at how Japanese use self-disclosure when communicating *with* Germans and how Germans use self-disclosure when communicating *with* Japanese, we are looking at intercultural communication.

If the term *culture* refers to societal cultures, then, as indicated earlier, a subculture is a subset of a culture having some different values, norms, and/or symbols that are not shared by all members of the larger culture. In other words, a

subculture involves a set of ideas that arise from the larger culture but differ in some respects. With respect to our differentiation of terminology, the most important subcultures are races and ethnic groups. The labels *race* and *ethnic group* often are used interchangeably. Such usage is incorrect. A *race* is a group of people who are biologically similar. An *ethnic group*, on the other hand, is a group of people who share a common cultural heritage usually based on a common national origin or language. Jews are, therefore, an ethnic group, not a race. An ethnic group may be made up of many races, and, similarly, a race may consist of more than one ethnic group.

Even though the process of communication between people from different subcultures is essentially the same as the process of communication between people from different cultures, different terms often are used. The terms used to designate communication between people from different subcultures are not as clear as we would like, but at times it is useful to be able to differentiate the type of communication being discussed by using specific terms. We therefore stipulate that *interracial communication* refers to communication between people from different races and *interethnic communication* refers to communication between people from different ethnic groups. The differentiation is not this simple, however. One culture may include several races and/or ethnic groups, and one race or ethnic group may exist in different cultures. This overlap leads to problems in labeling some forms of communication. If we look at communication between a white person from the United States and a black from Ghana, for example, are we observing interracial communication or intercultural communication? The answer, obviously, is both. As another example, what if a Jew from the United States is communicating with a Jew from Israel? Such communication is both intraethnic and intercultural. Such situations lead to conceptual confusion when we try to apply these terms.

Since the underlying processes in intracultural, intercultural, interracial, and interethnic communication are essentially the same and there is confusion as to when some of the terms are applicable, we need a way to refer to the common underlying process without differentiating between the different “types” of communication. The term intercultural communication is the most general; however, it is not adequate because it has specific connotations. The title of this book, *Communicating with Strangers*, hints at our solution to this problem. Anytime we communicate with people who are different and unknown and those people are in an environment unfamiliar to them, we are communicating with strangers. The people generally viewed as the most unknown and unfamiliar are those from different societal cultures, but people from different races or ethnic groups are also unknown and unfamiliar. In addition, people from our own culture can be unknown and unfamiliar in the same sense; for example, a new groom approaching his bride’s family for the first time is a stranger, according to our use of the term. In Chapter 2, we elaborate on our conceptualization of strangers; for now it is sufficient to say that when we talk about communicating with strangers, we are referring to the underlying process shared in common by intracultural, intercultural, intraracial, interracial, intraethnic, and interethnic communication.

## PLAN FOR THE BOOK

In the next chapter, we elaborate on our conceptualization of strangers and give an overview of the process of communicating with strangers. Also in Chapter 2, we present a model of communication used to organize the material covered in Parts Two and Three of the book.

In Part Two (Chapters 3 to 6), we examine the conceptual filters influencing our communication with strangers. The strategy employed in this part is to introduce the relevant concepts, examine how they vary across cultures, and apply them where feasible to our communication with strangers. Specifically, in Chapter 3, we examine the cultural influences on our communication with strangers. Chapter 4 focuses on the sociocultural influences on our communication with strangers, including our memberships in social groups. In Chapter 5, we look at social cognitive factors that create expectations when we communicate with strangers, our stereotypes and intergroup attitudes (ethnocentrism and prejudice)—the psychocultural influences. Chapter 6, the final chapter in Part Two, focuses on the environmental influences on our communication with strangers, including climate, geography, architecture, the situation, privacy regulation, territoriality, and temporality.

In Part Three (Chapters 7 to 9), we look at the transmitting and interpreting processes. Our strategy in this part is to introduce the concepts, to examine their variation across cultures, and to apply them to our communication with strangers. We begin, in Chapter 7, by examining cultural variations in interpreting, focusing on perception, attributional processes, cognitive styles, and patterns of thought. In Chapter 8, we look at cultural variations in verbal behavior, including language and patterns of thought. Cultural variations in nonverbal behaviors are examined in Chapter 9.

The final part of the book, Part Four (Chapters 10 to 15), considers selected aspects of intercultural interaction. The issues of intercultural communication effectiveness and perceived communication competence are discussed in Chapter 10. In Chapter 11, how we can effectively manage conflict with strangers is examined. Chapter 12 focuses on relationships between people from different subcultures or cultures, including friendships and marital relationships. In Chapter 13, we examine strangers' adaptation to new cultural environments. We examine both short-term adjustment and long-term acculturation of strangers in this chapter. Chapter 14 contains a discussion of the process of becoming intercultural, which is a desirable outcome to seek as a result of our communication with strangers. We conclude in Chapter 15 by discussing how cultural and ethnic differences can be used as resources in building community.

## SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the two major concepts, communication and culture, used throughout the remainder of this book. In light of the eight assumptions we make about the nature of communication, we stipulate that communication is a symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning. We

reserve the term *culture* for the cultural ordering process associated with the societal level of social ordering. Intercultural communication, therefore, is stipulated to be communication between people from different societal cultures.

We take the position that the underlying process of communication between people from different cultures or subcultures is the same as the underlying process of communication between people from the same culture or subculture. Given the similarity of the underlying process and the confusion of existing terminology, we argue that what is needed is a way to refer to the underlying process that all types of communication (i.e., intracultural, interracial, interethnic, and intercultural) have in common. Since none of the present terms are adequate, we introduce our notion of communicating with strangers. By *communicating with strangers*, we mean communicating with people who are unknown and unfamiliar, including people from another culture and people from our own culture or subculture who are in an environment new to them.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why do different people attach different meanings to symbols?
2. What factors influence the meanings we attach to messages?
3. Why can messages be transmitted from one person to another, while meanings cannot?
4. How do our implicit theories of communication influence the way we communicate?
5. How does predictability provide rhythm to our interactions?
6. Why are intentions not necessary for communication to take place?
7. What is the difference between the content and relationship dimensions of messages?
8. How do we impose structure on our communication?
9. Why are uncertainty and anxiety important aspects of communication?
10. What is meant by saying that “culture is our theory of the game being played”?
11. How do cross-cultural and intercultural communication differ?

## SUGGESTED READING

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