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COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS

AN APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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COMMUNICATING WITH STRANGERS:
An Approach to Intercultural Communication

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An Approach to the Study of Intercultural Communication

See at a distance an undesirable person;
See close at hand a desirable person;
Come closer to the undesirable person;
Move away from the desirable person.
Coming close and moving apart,
how interesting life is.
Gensho Ogura

Cultural variability in people's backgrounds influences their communication behavior. This cultural variability in communication leads many scholars studying intercultural communication to view it as a unique form of communication, differing in kind from other forms of communication (e.g., intracultural communication, communication between people from the same culture). This point of view, however, is not accepted widely. Sarbaugh (1979) points out that

> there appears to be a temptation among scholars and practitioners of communication to approach intercultural communication as though it were a different process than intracultural communication. As one begins to identify the variables that operate in the communication being studied, however, it becomes apparent that they are the same for both intracultural and intercultural settings. (p. 5)

We agree with Sarbaugh; not only are the variables the same, but the underlying communication process also is the same.

We believe that any approach to the study of intercultural communication must be consistent with the study of intracultural communication. In this chapter, and the remainder of this book, we present a perspective for the study of communication that is useful for understanding not only our communication with people from other cultures or subcultures, but also our communication with people from our own culture or subculture. We begin by looking at the linking concept in our view of communication, the concept of the stranger.

THE CONCEPT OF THE STRANGER

When we are confronted with cultural differences (and other forms of group differences, such as gender, ethnic, or class differences), we tend to view people from other cultures (or groups) as strangers. The term *stranger* is somewhat ambiguous in that it often is used to refer to aliens, intruders, foreigners, outsiders, newcomers, and immigrants, as well as any other person who is unknown and unfamiliar. Despite this ambiguity, "the concept of the stranger remains one of the most powerful sociological tools for analyzing social processes of individuals and groups confronting new social orders" (Shack, 1979, p. 2).

Simmel (1950/1908) views strangers as possessing the contradictory qualities of being both near and far at the same time:

> The unity of nearness and remoteness in every human relation is organized, in the phenomenon of the stranger, in a way which may be most briefly formulated by saying that in the relationship to him [or her], distance means that he [or she], who is also far, is actually near. . . . The stranger . . . is an element of the group itself. His [or her] position as a full-fledged member involves being both outside it and confronting it. (p. 402)

Strangers represent the idea of nearness because they are physically close and the idea of remoteness because they have different values and ways of doing things. Strangers are physically present and participating in a situation and, at the same time, are outside the situation because they are not members of the group.

Wood's (1934) view of the stranger is broader than Simmel's, and she adds a new dimension to describing strangers, meeting for the first time:

> We shall describe the stranger as one who has come into face-to-face contact with the group for the first time. . . . For us the stranger may be, as with Simmel, a potential wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, or he [or she] may come today and remain with us permanently. The condition of being a stranger is not . . . dependent upon the future duration of the contact, but it is determined by the fact that it was the first face-to-face meeting of individuals who have not known one another before. (pp. 43–44)

Wood, therefore, sees strangers as newly arrived outsiders.

Like Wood, Schuetz (1944) takes a broader view of the concept of the stranger than does Simmel. For Schuetz, the term *stranger* means "an adult individual . . . who tries to be permanently accepted or at least partially tolerated by the group which he [or she] approaches" (p. 499). This conceptualization includes not only the obvious cases of immigrants and sojourners to other cultures but also a person trying to join a closed club, a groom attempting to be accepted by the bride's family, a recruit entering the army, or any other person coming into a new and unfamiliar group. Schuetz argues that strangers do not understand the social world inhabited by the members of the group they approach. Parrillo (1980) succinctly summarizes Schuetz's perspective:

> Because this is a shared world, it is an intersubjective one. For the native, then, every social situation is a coming together not only of roles and identities, but also of shared realities—the intersubjective structure of consciousness. What is taken for granted by the native is problematic for the stranger. In a familiar world, people live through the day by responding to daily routine without questioning or reflection. To strangers, however, every situation is new and is therefore experienced as a crisis. (p. 3)

One of the defining characteristics of this view is that strangers may perceive their interactions in their new surroundings as a series of crises.

Herman and Schield (1960) take a similar position when they argue that the major problem strangers face in their new surroundings is "lack of security." Strangers do not have the knowledge necessary to understand fully their new environment or the communication of the people who live in it. Further, members of the host group do not possess information regarding individual strangers, even though they may have some information about the group or culture from which the strangers come. Since we do not have information regarding individual strangers, our initial impression of them must, therefore, be an abstract or categoric one (i.e., a stereotypic one). Strangers are classified on the basis of whatever information we can obtain. If the only information we have is their culture, we base our initial impression on this information. If we have additional information (their ethnicity, gender, class), we use that as well.

Strangers, as we conceive of them, are people who are members of different groups and unknown to us. It should be obvious that strangerhood is a figure-ground phenomenon—a stranger's status is always defined in relation to a host, a native, or some existing group. A person from the United States visiting another country and a person from another country visiting the United States are both strangers. A European American teacher in a predominantly African American school, a Native American working in a predominantly European American organization, a Vietnamese refugee in the United States, a new bride visiting the groom's family, and a Chicano moving into a predominantly European American neighborhood are all examples of strangers. In general, we include anyone entering a relatively unknown or unfamiliar environment under the rubric of stranger. This conceptualization, therefore, subsumes both Wood's and Schuetz's views on strangers.

Obviously, not everyone we meet for the first time is truly unknown and unfamiliar. Sometimes we are familiar with or know something about people we meet for the first time. Cohen (1972) argues that we can say our social interactions, not just our interactions with people we meet for the first time, vary with respect to the degree of strangeness and/or familiarity present in the interaction. Our interactions with close friends and relatives involve a high degree of familiarity, while our interactions with acquaintances and coworkers involve less familiarity and more strangeness. When we meet people for the first time, there may be any degree of strangeness and/or familiarity. When we meet a close friend of our best friend for the first time, for example, we may be somewhat familiar with that person already because of what our close friend has told us about her or him. When we meet a person from another subculture of our culture (e.g., a person from another ethnic group), in contrast, our interaction with that person usually involves more strangeness than familiarity. Because they do not share the same culture, our interactions with people from other cultures often involve the highest degree of strangeness and the least degree of familiarity.

Our use of the term *strangers* throughout this book refers to those people in relationships where there is a relatively high degree of strangeness and a relatively low degree of familiarity. Since our interactions with people from other cultures tend to involve the highest degree of strangeness and the lowest degree of familiarity, we focus on these interactions, but we also examine other interactions involving a relatively high degree of strangeness (e.g., those with members of different ethnic groups, social classes, ages).

As indicated earlier, strangerhood is a figure-ground phenomenon. When members of other groups approach our group in our environment, they are the strangers. When we approach other groups in their environment, we are the strangers. Harman (1987) points out that "in the dominant mode of social organization in western society—the metropolis—the stranger is not the exception but the rule. . . . strangeness is no longer a temporary condition to be overcome, but a way of life" (p. 44). She contends we are all strangers trying to become members of different groups or maintain our group memberships. Harman argues that "the defining characteristics of the modern stranger are cultural fluency and membership orientation. The expert navigator of the cultural world is one who may 'fit in' anywhere by being acutely aware of the cultural nuances" (p. 159). Kristeva (1991) also suggests that when we see others as strangers, we come to recognize the strangeness in ourselves. "By recognizing *our* uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it or enjoy it from the outside. The [stranger] is within me, hence we are all [strangers]" (p. 192).

In looking at the general process of communication with strangers, we are able to overcome one of the major conceptual problems of many analyses of intercultural communication. The problem to which we refer involves the drawing of artificial distinctions between intracultural, intercultural, interracial, and interethnic communication. While some variables may take on more importance in one situation than in another (e.g., our ethnic prejudices may be more important in interethnic communication than in intraethnic communication), each of the

situations is influenced by the same variables, albeit in varying degrees (e.g., in our intraethnic communication, our prejudices regarding sexism may be more of an influence than those regarding ethnicity). If the variables influencing each situation and the underlying process of communication are the same, it does not make sense to draw artificial distinctions between types of communication with those who are unfamiliar. By using the stranger as a linking concept, we can examine a general process, communicating with strangers, which subsumes intracultural, intercultural, interracial, and interethnic communication into one general framework. Before moving on, however, we find it worthwhile to reiterate some of the qualities of the stranger concept that help us understand our communication with people from different groups.

Levine (1979) points out that it is the dialectic between closeness and remoteness

> that makes the position of strangers socially problematic in all times and places. When those who would be close, in any sense of the term, are actually close, and those who should be distant are distant, everyone is "in his [or her] place." When those who should be distant are close, however, the inevitable result is a degree of tension and anxiety which necessitates some special kind of response. (p. 29)

Levine goes on to argue that

> group members derive security from relating in familiar ways to fellow group members and from maintaining their distance from nonmembers through established insulating mechanisms. In situations where an outsider comes into the social space normally occupied by group members only, one can presume an initial response of anxiety and at least latent antagonism. (p. 30)

As we indicated in Chapter 1, reducing anxiety is one of the major functions of communication when we interact with strangers. The anxiety we experience when interacting with strangers is a critical factor influencing our communication and one of the factors that differentiates communication with strangers from communication with people who are familiar. We discuss this concept in more detail later in this chapter.

Prior to presenting our organizing model of communication, we overview the process of communicating with strangers. Our focus in the next section is on differentiating how communication with strangers (i.e., intergroup communication) differs from our communication with people who are familiar (i.e., interpersonal communication).

INTERGROUP AND INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR

The communication processes underlying interpersonal and intergroup communication are the same. Different factors, nevertheless, are given different weights in

the two types of communication. In this section, we present two different, but complementary, ways of differentiating between interpersonal and intergroup behavior.

Types of Data Used in Making Predictions

Miller and Steinberg (1975) argue that we use three types of data when we make predictions about other people's behavior. The first type of data we use is *cultural.* The people in any culture generally behave in a regular fashion because of their postulates, norms, and values. It is this regularity that allows us to make predictions on the basis of cultural data. Miller and Sunnafrank (1982) point out that

> knowledge about another person's culture—its language, dominant values, beliefs, and prevailing ideology—often permits predictions of the person's probable responses to certain messages. . . . Upon first encountering a stranger, cultural information provides the only grounds for communicative predictions. This fact explains the uneasiness and perceived lack of control most people experience when thrust into an alien culture: they not only lack information about the individuals with whom they must communicate, they are bereft of information concerning shared cultural norms and values. (pp. 226–227)

Cultural data are used to predict behavior of people from our own culture and people from other cultures.

Two major factors influence our predictive accuracy when we use cultural data. First, the more experiences at the cultural level we have, the better our predictive accuracy is. When we are confronting someone from our own culture, the experiences to which we refer are in our culture. When we are communicating with strangers, on the other hand, our accuracy depends on our experiences with their culture. If we know little or nothing about strangers' culture, our predictions will be more inaccurate than if we know a lot about their culture. Second, errors in predictions are made either because we are not aware of the strangers' cultural experiences or because we try to predict the behavior of strangers on the basis of cultural experiences different from the ones they have had, for example, when we make ethnocentric predictions on the basis of our own cultural experiences (Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

The second type of data used in making predictions is *sociological.* Sociological predictions are based on strangers' memberships in or aspirations to particular social groups. "Knowledge of an individual's membership groups, as well as the reference groups to which he or she aspires, permits numerous predictions about responses to various messages" (Miller & Sunnafrank, 1982, p. 227). Membership in social groups may be voluntary, or strangers may be classified as a member of a group because of certain characteristics they possess. Our predictions at the sociological level, for example, include those based on strangers' memberships in political or other social groups, the roles they fill, their gender, or their ethnicity. Miller and Sunnafrank (1982) argue that sociological-level data are the principal kind used to predict the behavior of people from the same culture. The major error

in making predictions based on sociological-level data stems from the fact that strangers are members of many groups and when we communicate with strangers, we are not always sure which group's norms and values are influencing their behavior (Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

The final type of data used in making predictions about the outcomes of our communication behavior is *psychological.* Psychological predictions are based on the specific people with whom we are communicating. When using this type of data, we are concerned with how these people are different from and similar to other members of their culture and the groups to which they belong. When predictions are based on psychological data, "each participant relates to the other in terms of what sets the other apart from most people. They take into consideration each other's individual differences in terms of the subject and the occasion" (Dance & Larson, 1972, p. 56).

It is important to keep in mind that our predictions are rarely made on the basis of only one type of data. Once we have some psychological information about strangers with whom we are communicating, we use this information and combine it with our cultural and sociological data to make predictions about their behavior. Most of our predictions are some combination of the three levels of data, but one level often predominates.

For the purpose of the present analysis, we modify the labels for the three levels of data used in making predictions. Since all three levels are highly interrelated, we use labels reflecting the interrelations: *cultural, sociocultural,* and *psychocultural.* Our modification of the last two labels is intended only to emphasize that the three levels of data are interrelated, not to reflect a disagreement with Miller and Steinberg's (1975) conceptualization.

Our Identities Influence Our Behavior

We think about ourselves differently in different situations. The different ways we think about ourselves are our *identities.* In any particular situation, we may or may not be conscious of the identities influencing our behavior. Even though we may not be aware of the identities influencing our behavior, we act as though a clear identity is guiding our behavior (R. H. Turner, 1987).

Our identities can be grouped under three broad categories: human, social, and personal (J. C. Turner, 1987). Our human identities involve those views of ourselves that we believe we share with all other humans. It is important to recognize that "people and their cultures perish in isolation, but they are born or reborn in contact with other men and women, with men and women of another culture, another creed, another race. If we do not recognize our humanity in others, we shall not recognize it in ourselves" (Fuentes, 1992, Back cover). To understand our human identities, we have to look for those things we share in common with all other humans.

Our social identities involve those views of ourselves that we assume we share with other members of our ingroups. Ingroups are "groups of people about whose welfare [we are] concerned, with whom [we are] willing to cooperate

without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to discomfort or even pain" (Triandis, 1988, p. 75). Our social identities may be based on the roles we play, such as student, professor, or parent; the demographic categories in which we are categorized, such as our nationality, ethnicity, gender, or age; and our membership in formal and informal organizations, such as a political party, voluntary organization, or social club.

Our personal identities involve those views of ourselves that differentiate us from other members of our ingroups—those characteristics that define us as unique individuals. Our personality characteristics, for example, are part of our personal identities. Our personal identities may involve views of ourselves as being intelligent, attractive, caring, and so forth.

Our different identities influence our behavior in different situations. Tajfel's (1978) distinction between intergroup and interpersonal behavior is based on which identity is guiding behavior:

> These differences can be conceived as lying on a continuum, one extreme of which can be described as being "purely" interpersonal and the other as being "purely" intergroup. What is meant by "purely" interpersonal is any social encounter between two or more people in which all interaction that takes place is determined by the personal relationship between the individuals and by their respective individual characteristics [e.g., personal identities generate behavior]. The "intergroup" extreme is that in which all of the behavior of two or more individuals towards each other is determined by their membership in different social groups or categories [e.g., social identities generate behavior]. (p. 41)

Tajfel's distinction is similar to Miller and Steinberg's (1975) discussion of making predictions based on cultural, sociological, or psychological data. Pure interpersonal behavior occurs when all predictions are made on the basis of psychological data. Pure intergroup behavior, on the other hand, takes place when all predictions are made on the basis of sociological and/or cultural data. Pure intergroup behavior takes place when no individual differences are recognized. The source of intergroup behavior is social identity, and the source of interpersonal behavior is personal identity.

Tajfel (1978) argues that it is impossible to conceive of pure interpersonal behavior, that no instance of it can be found. "It is impossible to imagine a social encounter between two people which will not be affected, at least to some minimal degree, by their mutual assignments of one another to a variety of social categories about which some general expectations concerning their characteristics and behavior exist in the mind of the interactants" (p. 41). Tajfel contends that social identities come into play even in relationships between husbands and wives and between close friends. It is possible, in contrast, to conceive of an example of pure intergroup behavior. Tajfel (1978) cites an example of a bomber crew on a mission against an enemy population. The bomber crew members are involved in pure intergroup behavior because they are not perceiving the enemy as individuals. If you have ever watched the television program *M*A*S*H,* you may recall the episode "Dear Sigmund," in which a U.S. bombardier limps into the 4077th for medical aid. While

Hawkeye is administering to his wounds, the flyer talks about how the war does not inconvenience him much. All he does is strap himself into his seat in the plane, fly over the enemy, push a button, and drop his bombs, returning to his wife in Tokyo every weekend. Hawkeye then asks the bombardier if he has ever seen the enemy, and the flyer says he has not. The bombardier is, therefore, engaged in a pure form of intergroup behavior. During his stay at the 4077th, however, the bombardier is put to work carrying the wounded into the operating room. During one trip into the operating room, he notices a young Korean child who is about to undergo surgery. He asks Hawkeye what happened to the child. Hawkeye tells him that a bomb exploded in the child's village. The bombardier then asks whether it was one of "ours" or one of "theirs." Colonel Potter responds by saying it doesn't make any difference whose bomb it was. The bombardier declares that it makes a difference to him. Hawkeye counters by saying it doesn't make any difference to the child. At this point, the bombardier begins to see the Koreans, on whom he has been dropping bombs, as individuals. Since he now recognizes individual differences, however slight, in the members of the other group, the bombardier's behavior will not be pure intergroup behavior.

Other conceptualizations suggest that the interpersonal-intergroup continuum oversimplifies the nature of communication involved (Giles & Hewstone, 1982; Gudykunst & Lim, 1986; Stephenson, 1981). Stephenson (1981), for example, argues that

> it is difficult to think of any social situation which may not have both intergroup and interpersonal significance. Making love, for example, may seem unambiguously interpersonal, yet a consideration of the objectives achieved by James Bond's sexual exploits should prevent our being overly sentimental about performance, even in that sphere. In any interaction with another, our apparent membership in different social groups—be it male, female, young, English, black, or European—is at least a potential allegiance which may be exploited by the other, such that we act in some sense as *representatives* of fellow members of those groups. When our nationality, sex, or occupation becomes salient in the interaction, this does not necessarily obliterate the interpersonal significance of the encounter; indeed, it may enhance it. (p. 195)

Stephenson's argument suggests that both interpersonal and intergroup factors operate in every situation.

Stephenson (1981) distinguishes between encounters that involve both high interpersonal and high intergroup salience and those that involve low interpersonal and high intergroup salience in terms of how negotiations take place. If they are conducted face-to-face, then they involve high interpersonal and high intergroup salience. When negotiations take place over the phone, by contrast, they involve high intergroup and low interpersonal salience. Stephenson believes the difference is that in the face-to-face situation, negotiators are aware of the interpersonal significance of their behavior, while they are much less aware of it when they negotiate over the phone. Situations that involve high interpersonal and low intergroup salience include most encounters between friends, lovers, mates, and so forth. Situations that involve low interpersonal and low

intergroup salience encompass a large percentage of encounters between strangers, including interactions between strangers on public transportation, interactions between clerks and customers, and other encounters of this nature.

Interpersonal and intergroup salience can and does change within specific encounters (Coupland, 1980). In other words, both personal and social identities serve as generative mechanisms for behavior in the same encounter. This fact suggests that explanations of communication in social relationships must take both interpersonal and intergroup factors into consideration.

ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT

When we interact with strangers, our ability to communicate effectively is based, at least in part, on our ability to manage our anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1995). In this section, we examine the nature of uncertainty, anxiety, and mindfulness (the cognitive process that allows us to manage our uncertainty and anxiety). We begin with uncertainty.

Uncertainty in Interactions with Strangers

The predictions we make when we are communicating are aimed at reducing the uncertainty present whenever we communicate with strangers. Berger and Calabrese (1975) point out that the primary concern anytime we meet someone new is uncertainty reduction. Berger (1979) modified that position, arguing that we try to reduce uncertainty when the person we meet will be encountered in the future, provides rewards to us, or behaves in a deviant fashion. Given that strangers, especially those from other cultures or ethnic groups, are likely to behave in a deviant fashion, it is reasonable to say we try to reduce uncertainty when we communicate with strangers more than we do when we communicate with people who are familiar.

The Nature of Uncertainty. Berger and Calabrese (1975) point out that at least two distinct types of uncertainty are present in our interactions with strangers. First is the uncertainty we have about strangers' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behavior. We need to be able, for example, to predict which of several alternative behavior patterns strangers will choose to employ. An illustration is the situation when we meet a person we find attractive at a party. If we want to see this person again after the party, we try to think about different ways we can approach this person in order to persuade him or her to see us again. The different approaches we think about are the predictions of alternative behaviors that reduce our uncertainty. The second type of uncertainty Berger and Calabrese (1975) isolate involves explanations of strangers' behavior. Whenever we try to figure out why strangers behaved the way they did, we are engaging in explanatory uncertainty reduction. The problem we are addressing is one of reducing the number of possible explanations for the strangers' behavior. This type of uncertainty reduction is necessary if we are

to understand their behavior and, thus, be able to increase our ability to predict their behavior in the future.

It appears that there is greater uncertainty in our initial interactions with strangers than with people who are familiar (Gudykunst, 1991). Higher uncertainty does not mean, however, that we will be motivated to reduce uncertainty more when we communicate with strangers than when we communicate with people who are familiar. While strangers may behave in a deviant fashion (e.g., not follow *our* norms or communication rules), they rarely are seen as sources of rewards and we may not anticipate seeing them again in the future. When we do not actively try to reduce our uncertainty regarding strangers' behavior, we rely on our categorizations of strangers to reduce our uncertainty and guide our predictions. As indicated earlier, that approach often leads to misunderstandings.

Minimum and Maximum Thresholds. Some degree of uncertainty exists in all relationships. We can never totally predict or explain other people's behavior. We all have maximum and minimum thresholds for uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1993). If our uncertainty is above the maximum threshold or below the minimum threshold, we feel uncomfortable and we will have difficulty communicating effectively. If our uncertainty is above our maximum threshold, we do not think we have enough information to predict or explain other people's behavior. Thus, we lack confidence in our predictions and explanations of other people's behavior. When there are norms or rules guiding behavior in a particular situation, the norms or rules allow us unconsciously to predict how others will behave, and our uncertainty therefore will be below our maximum threshold. Also, when we have some information about others so that we feel comfortable predicting how they will behave in the situation, our uncertainty will be below our maximum threshold. When our uncertainty is below our maximum threshold, we have sufficient confidence in the information we have to predict and explain other people's behavior.

If our uncertainty is below our minimum threshold, we think other people's behavior is highly predictable; we have a high level of confidence in our ability to predict other people's behavior. High levels of predictability, however, often are associated with boredom. When this situation occurs, there may not be sufficient novelty in our relationships for us to sustain interest in interacting with the other people, and we may not be motivated to communicate. It also is important to remember that confidence in our predictions does not mean that our predictions are accurate. When we see other people's behavior as highly predictable, we are likely to misinterpret their messages because we do not consider the possibility that our interpretations of their messages are wrong. In other words, overconfidence can breed misinterpretations.

Communicating effectively requires that our uncertainty be between our minimum and maximum thresholds (Gudykunst, 1995). If our uncertainty is above our maximum threshold or below our minimum threshold, we need to manage our uncertainty consciously to improve the effectiveness of our communication.

Uncertainty over Time. Generally, as we get to know strangers, our uncertainty regarding their behavior tends to decrease (Hubbert, Guerrero, & Gudykunst, 1995). Uncertainty, however, does not always decrease as relationships change over time. It also can increase. When we first meet strangers, our uncertainty tends to be above our maximum threshold since we do not feel comfortable predicting their behavior. Once we meet strangers and see that they follow the rules of interacting, our uncertainty will drop below our maximum threshold. We will assume that we can use cultural norms to predict their behavior. As we get to know strangers in the United States, we use their attitudes, values, and beliefs to predict and explain their behavior (cultural differences in uncertainty reduction are discussed below).

While uncertainty tends to decrease as we get to know strangers, events may occur in our established relationships or strangers might do something we do not expect that increases our uncertainty. When, for example, we find out that others are engaged in competing relationships, when we lose closeness in a relationship, as well as when we find out that others have deceived or betrayed us, our uncertainty may increase (Planalp, Rutherford, & Honeycutt, 1988). The more surprised we are, the more our uncertainty is likely to increase. It is possible that our uncertainty may increase so much that it rises above our maximum threshold. If that situation occurs, we must reduce our uncertainty to feel comfortable interacting with the other person. We can reduce the uncertainty by seeking information, such as asking why the person behaved the way he or she did.

Depending on the nature of the event that increases our uncertainty and on how we manage the uncertainty, increases in uncertainty can have positive or negative consequences for our relationships with others. If we find out, for example, that our romantic partner is seeing someone else, that realization probably will increase our uncertainty above our maximum threshold. Depending on our partner's explanation, we may or may not be able to reduce our uncertainty about our partner's future behavior below our maximum threshold. If we cannot reduce our uncertainty, we might end the relationship. If we can reduce our uncertainty and we are confident that our romantic partner will not see others in the future, in contrast, our uncertainty probably will return to our comfort range.

In summary, our uncertainty regarding strangers' behavior fluctuates over time. If our uncertainty is above our maximum threshold or below our minimum threshold, we need to manage it consciously to increase the effectiveness of our communication. Figure 2.1 provides a visual summary of how uncertainty might change over time. The specific patterns that emerge depend on the two people involved in the relationship, what happens between them, and events external to the relationship (e.g., changes in the relationship between the two groups of which participants are members).

Uncertainty in Intergroup Encounters. Many factors influence the amount of uncertainty we experience when we communicate with strangers (Gudykunst, 1988b, 1995). These factors include, but are not limited to, our expectations, our social identities, the perception of similarity between our group and the strangers'

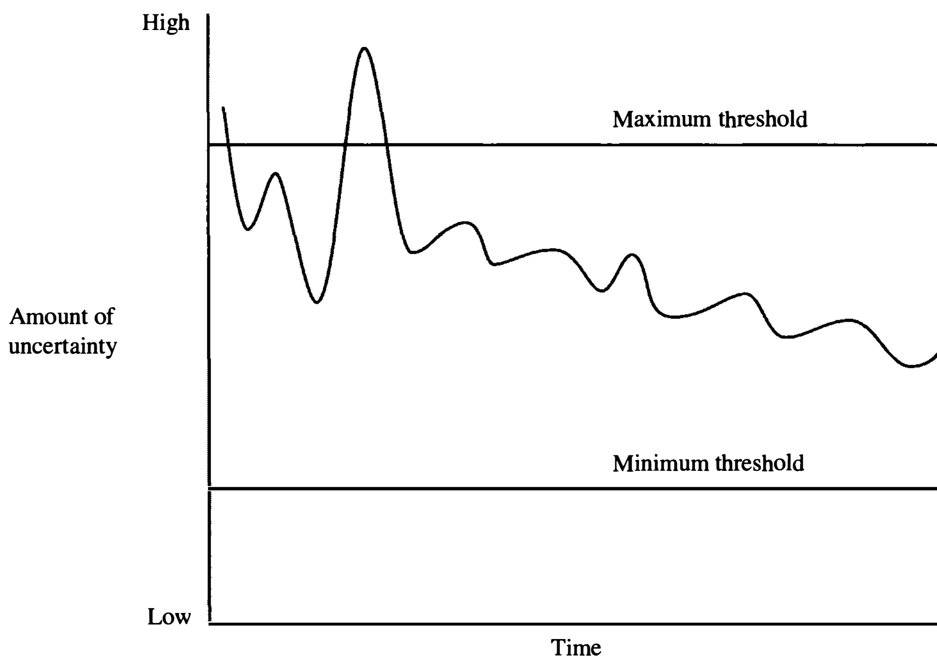


Figure 2.1 Hypothetical form of uncertainty over time.

groups, the degree to which we share communication networks with strangers, and the interpersonal salience of our contact with strangers.

Well-defined expectations (e.g., complex images of strangers and their groups) help us reduce uncertainty. The more well-defined our expectations are, the more confident we will be predicting strangers' behavior. We can have either well-defined positive or well-defined negative expectations. Well-defined expectations alone, however, do not necessarily help us explain strangers' behavior. To accurately explain strangers' behavior, we need to have accurate information regarding strangers' cultures and group memberships as well as about the individual strangers with whom we are communicating. We discuss several strategies for acquiring this information in Chapter 12.

Gudykunst (1988b) argues that the stronger our social identities are (i.e., the more important our group memberships are to how we define ourselves), the greater our predictive certainty regarding strangers' behavior. This claim, however, has to be qualified. Gudykunst and Hammer (1988b) report that strength of social identity reduces uncertainty only when we recognize that the strangers are from another group and when the strangers with whom we are communicating are perceived to be typical members of their group. When the strangers are perceived to be atypical members of their group, we do not treat them on the basis of their group membership; i.e., we see them as "an exception to the rule." In that case, our communication is influenced by our personal identities, not our social identities. When communication is based on our personal identities, we need information about the individual stranger with whom we are communicating to reduce uncertainty.

The degree to which our group is similar to the strangers' groups also influences our ability to reduce uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1988b). If we perceive that the strangers' groups are similar to our own ingroup, we have more confidence in our ability to predict strangers' behavior. Perceived similarity, however, may not increase our ability to explain strangers' behavior accurately because we may perceive similarities when we are actually different or perceive differences when we are actually similar. Knowledge of the actual similarities or dissimilarities between our group and the strangers' groups is necessary to reduce our explanatory uncertainty.

The degree to which we share communication networks with the strangers also influences the amount of uncertainty we experience when we communicate with strangers (Gudykunst, 1988b). The more we know the same people that the strangers with whom we are communicating know, the more we can reduce uncertainty. Further, the degree to which we want to establish an interpersonal relationship with the specific strangers contributes to the reduction of uncertainty. If we are physically or socially attracted to the strangers with whom we are communicating, our confidence in our ability to predict their behavior will increase. In addition, our cultural and linguistic knowledge of the strangers' culture helps us predict their behavior. The more we understand and can speak the strangers' language and the more knowledge we have of their culture, the more our uncertainty will be reduced. We will discuss the role of linguistic knowledge in more detail in Chapter 8.

Anxiety in Interactions with Strangers

When we communicate with strangers, we not only have a high level of uncertainty, we also have a high level of anxiety. The anxiety we experience when we communicate with strangers usually is based on negative expectations. Actual or anticipated interaction with members of different groups leads to anxiety.

Minimum and Maximum Thresholds. We have maximum and minimum thresholds for anxiety (Gudykunst, 1993). If our anxiety is above our upper threshold, we are so uneasy that we do not want to communicate with others. If our anxiety is below our minimum threshold, not enough adrenaline is running through our system to motivate us to communicate with others. If we are to be motivated to communicate with others, our anxiety has to be below our maximum threshold and above our minimum threshold. The role of anxiety in interpersonal communication is similar to its role in our performance on tests. If we are too anxious, we do not perform well on tests. Similarly, if we are not at all anxious, we do not perform well. This argument is consistent with Janis' (1971) theory of anticipatory fear. He contends that moderate levels of fear lead to adaptive processes, while low and high levels do not. There is an optimal level of anxiety that facilitates our experiencing flow or having optimal experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

If we are to communicate effectively with others, our anxiety needs to be below our maximum threshold and above our minimum threshold. When anxiety is above our maximum or below our minimum thresholds, we tend to process information in a very simplistic fashion. When our anxiety is too high, for example, we

use only our stereotypes to predict other people's behavior. Since stereotypes are never accurate when applied to an individual, our predictions are inaccurate and our communication, therefore, is likely to be ineffective.

Individuals' minimum and maximum thresholds differ. One way that we can tell if our anxiety is above our maximum threshold is by paying attention to our "gut reaction." If we feel a few butterflies in our stomach, our anxiety probably is not above our maximum threshold. A few butterflies probably indicate a normal amount of anxiety, an amount between our minimum and maximum thresholds. When we do not feel any butterflies or nervousness, our anxiety is probably below our minimum threshold. If, however, we have a stomachache and the palms of our hands are sweating, our anxiety is probably above our maximum threshold. The physical indicators each of us can use will differ. By paying attention to our reactions, we can figure out when our anxiety is so high that we do not feel comfortable communicating, and when it is so low that we do not care what happens. Once we know where these points are, we can cognitively manage our anxiety.

Anxiety over Time. Generally, as we get to know strangers, the anxiety we experience in interacting with them tends to decrease (Hubbert et al., 1995). We do not mean to imply, however, that anxiety continually decreases. While there is a general trend for our anxiety to decrease the more we get to know strangers, our anxiety can increase or decrease at any particular point in a relationship depending on what is going on in the relationship and how we interpret it.

When we first meet strangers, our anxiety might be above our maximum threshold, especially if we see strangers as attractive in some way or as a member of a different group. After we talk with strangers, our anxiety probably decreases somewhat, assuming that we see that strangers are not a threat to us. As our relationship with strangers becomes more intimate, our overall level of anxiety tends to decrease. As we get to know strangers, however, our anxiety fluctuates depending on the specific circumstances of our interaction. The first time we kiss a date, for example, our anxiety increases.

If we become extremely comfortable with strangers, our anxiety may drop below our minimum threshold. If this situation occurs, our motivation to communicate with strangers decreases and we may not make the effort to communicate. It is also possible, however, that something may occur in our relationship and our anxiety will increase dramatically, possibly rising above our maximum threshold. If we are involved in a romantic relationship, think that the relationship is going well, and want it to continue, our anxiety might increase dramatically if our partner told us that he or she wanted to break off the relationship.

In summary, our anxiety about communicating with strangers fluctuates over time. If our anxiety is above our maximum threshold or below our minimum threshold, we need to manage it consciously to communicate effectively. Figure 2.2 provides a visual summary of how anxiety might change over time. The specific pattern that emerges is a function of the two people involved, what happens in the relationship, and external events (e.g., the relationships between the groups of which individuals are members).

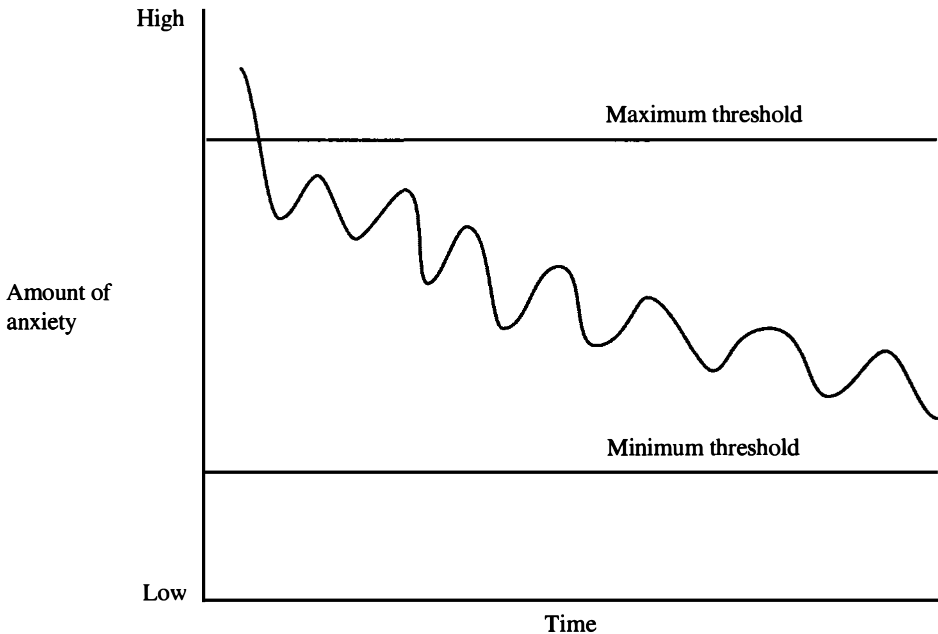


Figure 2.2 Hypothetical form of anxiety over time.

Anxiety in Intergroup Interactions. Stephan and Stephan (1985) argue that we fear four types of negative consequences when interacting with strangers. First, we fear negative consequences for our self-concept. In interacting with strangers, we worry "about feeling incompetent, confused, and not in control. . . . [We] anticipate discomfort, frustration, and irritation due to the awkwardness of intergroup interactions" (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 159). We also may fear the loss of self-esteem, that our social identities will be threatened, and that we will feel guilty if we behave in ways that offend strangers.

Second, we may fear that negative behavioral consequences will result from our communication with strangers. We may feel that strangers will exploit us, take advantage of us, or try to dominate us. We also may worry about performing poorly in the presence of strangers or worry that physical harm or verbal conflict will occur.

Third, we fear negative evaluations of strangers. We fear rejection, ridicule, disapproval, and being stereotyped negatively. These negative evaluations, in turn, can be seen as threats to our social identities. Recent research suggests that we perceive communication with people who are familiar as more agreeable and less abrasive than communication with strangers (Hoyle, Pinkley, & Insko, 1989).

Fourth, we may fear negative evaluations by members of our ingroups. If we interact with strangers, members of our ingroups may disapprove. We may fear that "ingroup members will reject" us, "apply other sanctions," or identify us "with the outgroup" (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 160).

Several factors are associated with the amount of anxiety we experience when we communicate with strangers. Thinking about the behavior in which we need to engage when communicating with strangers, for example, can reduce our anxiety about interacting with them (Janis & Mann, 1977). Further, if we focus on finding out as much as we can about strangers and forming accurate impressions of them, the biases we have, based on our anxiety and negative expectations, will be reduced (Leary, Kowalski, & Bergen, 1988; Neuberg, 1989). Stephan and Stephan (1989) also found that the less intergroup contact we have experienced, the less ethnocentric we are; and the more positive our stereotypes are, the less intergroup anxiety we experience.

Stephan and Stephan (1985) isolate three broad categories of antecedents to intergroup anxiety: prior intergroup relations, intergroup cognitions (e.g., stereotypes and intergroup attitudes), and situational factors. The important aspects of prior intergroup relations that influence the amount of intergroup anxiety we experience when communicating with strangers are the amount of contact we have had with the strangers' groups and the conditions under which that contact occurred. Stephan and Stephan argue that the more contact we have had and the clearer the norms are for intergroup relations, the less intergroup anxiety we will experience. If, however, there has been prior conflict between our group and the strangers' groups or our economic and political interests do not coincide, we are likely to experience intergroup anxiety.

The way we think about strangers influences our affective reactions toward them. The important intergroup cognitions are our knowledge of strangers' cultures, our stereotypes, our prejudice, our ethnocentrism, and our perceptions of ingroup-outgroup differences (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). The less knowledge we have of strangers' groups, the more anxiety we will experience. Negative cognitive expectations (i.e., negative stereotypes and prejudice) lead to intergroup anxiety. The greater the differences (real or imagined) we perceive between our group and the strangers' groups, the more intergroup anxiety we will experience.

The situational factors that contribute to intergroup anxiety include the amount of structure in the situation in which contact occurs, the type of interdependence, the group composition, and the relative status of the participants. Stephan and Stephan point out that in structured situations, the norms provide guides for our behavior and reduce our anxiety. The more unstructured the situation is, therefore, the greater our intergroup anxiety. Situations in which we cooperate with strangers involve less anxiety than situations in which we compete with them. Further, we will experience less anxiety when we find ourselves in situations where our ingroup is in the majority than in situations where our ingroup is in the minority. Finally, we will experience less anxiety in situations where our ingroup has higher status than the strangers' groups than in situations where our ingroup has lower status.

Stephan and Stephan (1985) isolate cognitive, behavioral, and affective consequences of intergroup anxiety. While their focus is on the negative consequences, positive consequences also can occur. One of the behavioral consequences of anxiety is avoidance. We avoid strangers because it reduces our anxiety. When we are

experiencing anxiety and cannot avoid strangers, we will terminate the interaction as soon as we can. Cognitively, intergroup anxiety leads to biases in information processing. The more anxious we are, the more likely we will attune to the behaviors we expected to see (e.g., those based on our stereotypes) and the more likely we are to confirm these expectations (i.e., we will not attune to behavior that is inconsistent with our expectations). The greater our anxiety, the more we will be self-aware and concerned with our self-esteem. When we are highly anxious, we therefore try to make our own group look good in comparison with other groups.

Mindfulness

To manage our uncertainty and anxiety, we must be conscious (i.e., mindful) of our communication. We do not, however, generally think much about our behavior. Much of our communication behavior, for example, is habitual. When we are communicating habitually, we are following scripts—"a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual involving him [or her] either as a participant or an observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). Langer (1978) argues that when we first encounter a new situation, we consciously seek cues to guide our behavior. As we have repeated experiences with the same event, we have less need to think consciously about our behavior. "The more often we engage in the activity, the more likely it is that we rely on scripts for the completion of the activity and the less likely there will be any correspondence between our actions and those thoughts of ours that occur simultaneously" (Langer, 1978, p. 39).

As indicated earlier, when we are engaging in habitual or scripted behavior, we are not highly aware of what we are doing or saying. Borrowing an analogy from flying a plane, we might say that we are on automatic pilot. In Langer's (1978) terminology, we are mindless. Recent research, however, suggests that we do not communicate totally on automatic pilot. Rather, we pay sufficient attention so that we can recall key words in the conversations we have (Kitayama & Burnstein, 1988).

Langer (1989) isolates three characteristics of mindfulness: (1) creating new categories, (2) being open to new information, and (3) being aware of more than one perspective. One condition that contributes to being mindless is the *use of broad categories.* Categorization often is based on physical (e.g., gender, race) or cultural (e.g., ethnic background) characteristics, but we also can categorize others in terms of their attitudes (e.g., liberal or conservative) or approaches to life (e.g., Christian or Buddhist; Trungpa, 1973). Langer (1989) points out that "categorizing is a fundamental and natural human activity. It is the way we come to know the world. Any attempt to eliminate bias by attempting to eliminate the perception of differences is doomed to failure" (p. 154). Being mindful involves making more, not fewer, distinctions. When we are on automatic pilot, we tend to use broad categories to predict other people's behavior, for example, their culture, ethnicity, or sex, or the role they are playing. When we are mindful, we can create new categories that are more specific. Rather than using the broad category *professor,* for example, students can subcategorize professors into males/females,

professors who are formal/professors who are informal, professors who call students by name/professors who do not call students by name, and so forth. The more subcategories we use, the more personalized the information we use to make predictions will be.

Mindfulness involves being *open to new information* (Langer, 1989). When we behave on automatic pilot in a particular situation, we tend to see the same thing occurring in the situation that we saw the previous time in the same situation. If we are consciously open to new information, however, we see the subtle differences in our own and other people's behavior that may take place. The more we think about how to behave in situations, the more appropriate and effective our behavior tends to be (Cegala & Waldron, 1992).

Being open to new information involves focusing on the process of communication that is taking place, not the outcome of our interactions with others:

> An outcome orientation in social situations can induce mindlessness. If we think we know how to handle a situation, we don't feel a need to pay attention. If we respond to the situation as very familiar (as a result, for example, of overlearning), we notice only minimal cues necessary to carry out the proper scenarios. If, on the other hand, the situation is strange, we might be so preoccupied with the thought of failure ("what if I make a fool of myself?") that we miss nuances of our own and others' behavior. In this sense, we are mindless with respect to the immediate situation, although we may be thinking quite actively about outcome related issues. (Langer, 1989, p. 34)

When we focus on the outcome, we miss subtle cues in our interactions with others which leads to misunderstandings. Focusing on the process of communication forces us to be mindful of our behavior and to pay attention to the situations in which we find ourselves (Langer, 1989).

To be mindful, we must also recognize that there is *more than one perspective* that can be used to understand or explain our interaction with others (Langer, 1989). Suppose a friend sprained her or his ankle and asked you to go to the local pharmacy for an Ace bandage. What would you do if the local pharmacy was out of Ace bandages (and there was only the one pharmacy available)? Most of us would probably return and tell our friend that the pharmacy was out of Ace bandages if we were acting on automatic pilot (Langer, 1989). If we were mindful, however, we might think to ask the pharmacist if there are alternatives to using an Ace bandage on a sprained ankle.

When we communicate on automatic pilot, we do not recognize alternative perspectives. The mindset we bring to communication situations limits our ability to see the choices we actually have about how to behave in most situations (Langer, 1989). When we communicate mindfully, however, we can look for the options that are available to us and not be limited by only those that come to mind in the situation. When we are communicating mindfully, we can use all the communication resources available to us rather than limit ourselves to those in our implicit personal theories of communication.

Recognizing alternative perspectives is critical to effective communication. Effective communication requires recognizing that other people use their own perspective to interpret our messages, and they may not interpret our messages the way we intended them. When we communicate on automatic pilot, we assume everyone uses the same perspective as we do. It is only when we are mindful of the process of our communication that we can determine how our interpretations of messages differ from other people's interpretations of those messages.

We often become conscious of our behavior when we enter new situations, such as communicating with strangers. Berger and Douglas (1982) list five conditions under which we are highly cognizant of our behavior:

> (1) in novel situations where, by definition, no appropriate script exists, (2) where external factors prevent completion of a script, (3) when scripted behavior becomes effortful because substantially more of the behavior is required than is usual, (4) when a discrepant outcome is experienced, or (5) where multiple scripts come into conflict so that involvement in any one script is suspended. In short, individuals will enact scripted sequences whenever those sequences are available and will continue to do so until events unusual to the script are encountered. (pp. 46–47)

It can be inferred that we are more aware of our behavior when communicating with strangers than we are when communicating with people who are familiar. The problem, however, is that we tend to be aware of outcomes, not the process of communication. Our mindfulness, therefore, does not increase our effectiveness.

Uncertainty, Anxiety, Mindfulness, and Effective Communication

In general, as our uncertainty and anxiety decrease, the better we get to know others. Uncertainty and anxiety, however, do not increase or decrease consistently over time. Uncertainty, for example, is not reduced every time we communicate with strangers. We may reduce our uncertainty the first time we communicate, but something may occur the second time we communicate (e.g., the stranger does something we did not expect) and our uncertainty might increase. Once we have established a relationship with strangers, we can expect our uncertainty and anxiety regarding strangers to fluctuate over time. As the relationship becomes more intimate, nevertheless, there should be a general pattern for uncertainty and anxiety to decease. There tends to be less uncertainty and anxiety in acquaintance relationships, for example, than in relationships with strangers, and there is less uncertainty and anxiety in friendships than in acquaintance relationships. At the same time, within any stage (e.g., acquaintance, friend) of a particular relationship, uncertainty and anxiety will fluctuate over time.

We do not want to try to reduce our anxiety and uncertainty totally. At the same time, we cannot communicate effectively if our uncertainty and anxiety

are too high. If uncertainty and anxiety are too high, we cannot accurately interpret strangers' messages or make accurate predictions about strangers' behavior. If anxiety is above our maximum threshold, as it often is when we first meet strangers, we are too anxious to communicate effectively. When anxiety is above our maximum threshold, the way we process information becomes very simple, thereby decreasing our ability to predict strangers' behavior (Wilder & Shapiro, 1989). When uncertainty is above our maximum threshold, we do not think we can predict strangers' behavior. In most situations, however, there are sufficiently clear norms and rules for communication so that our uncertainty and anxiety are reduced below our maximum threshold. Even if our uncertainty and anxiety are below the maximum threshold, either or both may still be too high for us to communicate effectively. If we are to communicate effectively, our anxiety needs to be sufficiently low so that we can accurately interpret and predict strangers' behavior. When anxiety is too high, we communicate on automatic pilot and interpret strangers' behavior using our own cultural frame of reference.

If uncertainty and anxiety are low, we may not be motivated to communicate. If both uncertainty and anxiety are consistently below our minimum threshold in a particular relationship, for example, the relationship will become boring. Kruglanski (1989) points out that we all have a need to avoid closure on topics or people to allow for mystery to be maintained. When uncertainty is below our minimum threshold, we also become overconfident that we understand strangers' behavior and we do not question whether our predictions are accurate. If we are to communicate effectively, our uncertainty and anxiety both must be above our minimum threshold.

Uncertainty and anxiety do not necessarily increase and decrease at the same time. We may reduce our uncertainty and be highly anxious. Consider, for example, a situation in which we predict very confidently that something negative is going to happen. We also may reduce our anxiety and have high uncertainty. If we are to communicate effectively, our anxiety must be sufficiently low (well below maximum threshold, but above minimum) that we can reduce our explanatory uncertainty. If our anxiety is high, we must cognitively manage our anxiety (i.e., become mindful) if we are to communicate effectively (we discuss this process in detail in Chapter 10, on effectiveness).

When we have managed our anxiety, we need to try to develop accurate predictions and explanations for strangers' behavior. This attempt requires that we be mindful of our communication. When we communicate on automatic pilot, we predict and interpret strangers' behavior using our frame of reference. When we are mindful, in contrast, we are open to new information and aware of alternative perspectives (e.g., strangers' perspectives; Langer, 1989). If we focus on the process of our communication with strangers and try to understand how they are interpreting messages, we can increase the accuracy of our predictions and explanations for strangers' behavior. This approach inevitably will increase the effectiveness of our communication with strangers (effectiveness is discussed in more detail in Chapter 10).

AN ORGANIZING MODEL FOR STUDYING COMMUNICATION WITH STRANGERS

The model presented in this section is designed to serve two functions. First, it helps isolate and identify the elements influencing our communication with strangers. Second, the model serves as a guide to the organization of the material presented in Parts Two and Three of the book. Our purpose in developing the model is not to describe the process of communication with strangers, but rather, to organize the elements influencing the process so that they can be discussed systematically.

The model is diagrammed in Figure 2.3. In constructing the model, we attempted to find a workable compromise between complexity and simplicity. As it stands, the model contains all the major elements, yet is simple enough to be interpreted easily. The elements included in the model are transmitting and interpreting messages, as well as the cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental influences on the communication process.

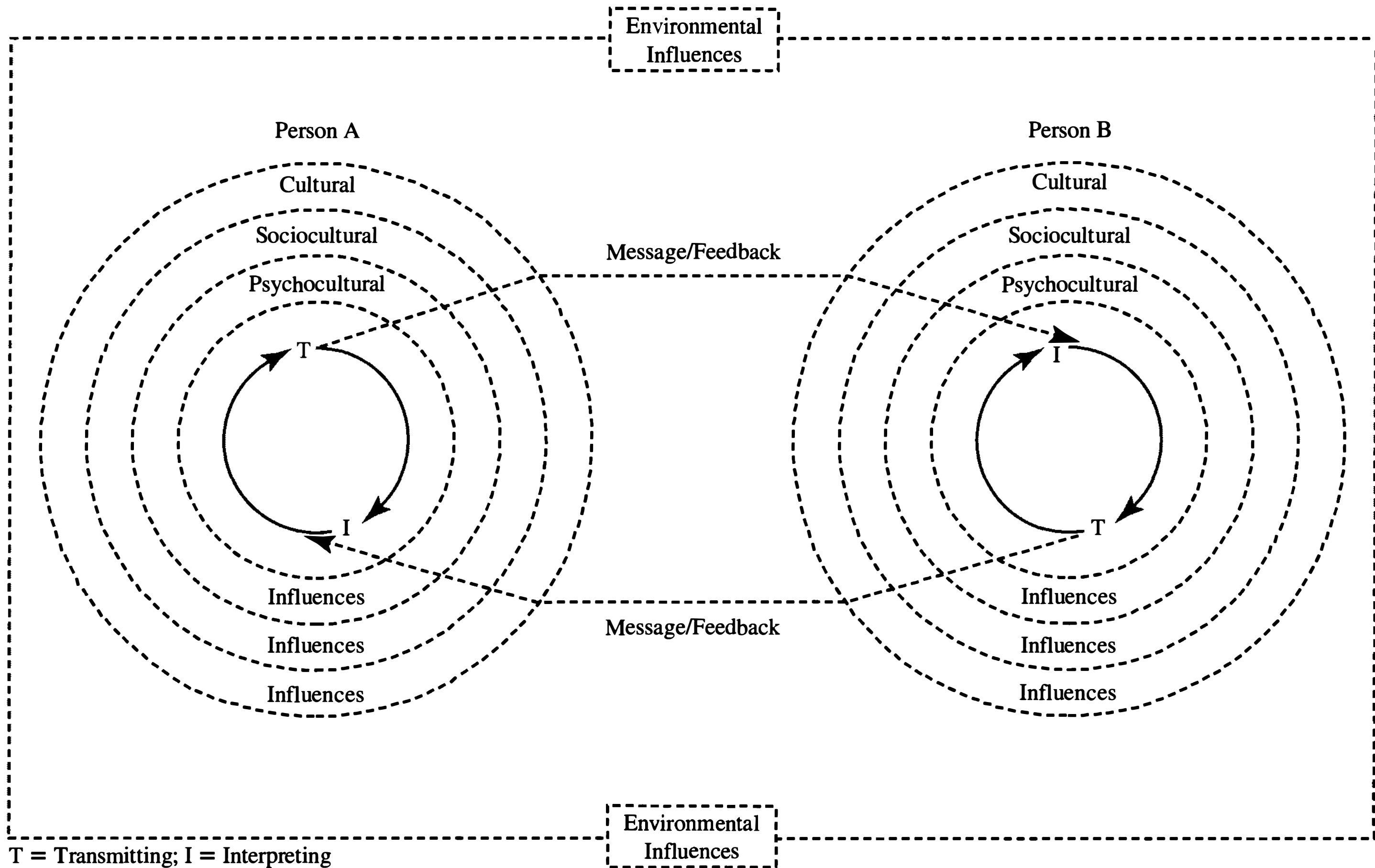
In examining the model, we must keep in mind that any model, out of necessity, excludes certain elements. The problem of premature closure, as the exclusion of elements is called, is unavoidable in constructing a model. In deciding which elements to include, we used two criteria: (1) Is the element useful in explaining our communication with strangers? and (2) Is there research available on the element's influence on communication?

Since each of the elements of the model is discussed in detail in Parts Two and Three of the book, the following is intended only as an introduction. Our purpose here, therefore, is to put the material presented in the next two parts of the book into context.

An Overview of the Model

Given our view of communication, we see transmitting and interpreting of communication messages to be an interactive process influenced by conceptual filters, which we categorize into cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental factors. This interaction is illustrated in Figure 2.3 by the way the center circle, which contains the interaction between transmitting and interpreting of messages, is surrounded by three other circles representing cultural, sociocultural, and psychocultural influences. The circles are drawn with dashed lines to indicate that the elements affect, and are affected by, the other elements. The two persons represented in the model are surrounded by a dashed box representing the environmental influences. This box is drawn with a dashed rather than a solid line because the immediate environment in which the communication takes place is not an isolated environment, or "closed system." Most communication between people takes place in a social environment that includes other people who also are engaging in communication.

The message/feedback between the two communicators is represented by the lines from one person's transmitting to the other person's interpreting and from



T = Transmitting; I = Interpreting

Figure 2.3 An organizing model for studying communication with strangers.

the second person's transmitting to the first person's interpreting. Two message/feedback lines are shown to indicate that anytime we communicate, we are simultaneously engaged in transmitting and interpreting of messages. In other words, communication is not static; we do not transmit a message and do nothing until we receive feedback. Rather, we interpret incoming stimuli at the same time as we are transmitting messages.

The cultural, sociocultural, and psychocultural influences serve as conceptual filters for our transmit and interpret messages. By *filters,* we mean mechanisms that delimit the number of alternatives from which we choose when we transmit and interpret messages. More specifically, the filters limit the predictions we make about how strangers might respond to our communication behavior. The nature of the predictions we make, in turn, influences the way we choose to transmit our messages. Further, the filters delimit what stimuli we pay attention to and how we choose to interpret incoming messages.

Transmitting 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 messages into codes that can be transmitted. Messages can be transmitted in many forms, but for the purpose of our analysis, two are most relevant: language (verbal codes) and nonverbal behaviors (we exclude codes such as mathematics, music, etc.). As indicated earlier, the process of transmitting messages is accomplished at varying levels of consciousness.

Language is one of the major vehicles through which we encode messages. Obviously, languages can differ from culture to culture. Culture and language are closely intertwined, with each influencing the other. Our language is a product of our culture, and our culture is a product of our language. The language we speak influences what we see and think, and what we see and think, in part, influences our culture.

Not only are messages transmitted verbally, but they also are encoded nonverbally. Nonverbal messages, like language, vary from culture to culture. Language is mostly a conscious activity, while nonverbal behavior is mostly an unconscious activity. That is, we generally are not aware of the messages we are encoding nonverbally through our gestures, facial expressions, or tones of voice, to name only a few behaviors. When we encounter nonverbal behaviors greatly different from our own (i.e., when communicating with strangers), however, we may become unusually conscious of those behaviors. We discuss the transmitting of messages in detail in Chapters 8 and 9.

Interpreting Messages

To a certain extent, interpreting messages is the opposite of transmitting messages. When we interpret a message, our perceptions depend on what the other person says verbally, what nonverbal behavior the other person exhibits, our own mes-

sages, our conceptual filters, and the context in which the message is received. In other words, how we interpret the messages encoded by strangers is a function of what they have transmitted, what we had previously transmitted to them, the context in which we are communicating, and our conceptual filters.

As indicated earlier, the way in which we process the incoming stimuli is partially a function of our conceptual filters. More specifically, the filters delimit the stimuli we observe and tell us how specific stimuli are to be interpreted. Consider strangers who are visiting Japan and are invited into a Japanese home, where it is expected that shoes be removed before entering the house. The strangers may see the Japanese family's shoes by the door but, because of their conceptual filters, not attribute any meaning to the stimuli and, therefore, walk into the house with shoes still on their feet. When the Japanese hosts become upset, the strangers will have no idea what they did wrong. The strangers' conceptual filters have delimited the stimuli to which they attribute meaning, thereby influencing the interpretations they make about the situation. We discuss interpreting messages in detail in Chapter 7.

Cultural Influences

The cultural influences include those factors involved in the cultural ordering process described in Chapter 1. For the purpose of our analysis, we focus on dimensions that explain similarities and differences across cultures. Is our culture dominated by concerns for the individual (i.e., individualism) or for the collectivity (i.e., collectivism)? These dimensions affect the values and the norms and rules that influence our communication behavior. *Values* are shared conceptions of the desired ends of social life and the means to reach those goals (Rokeach, 1972). They express a collective view of what is important and unimportant, good and bad. The norms and rules of a culture specify the acceptable and unacceptable behavior in our interactions with others. It is the norms and rules of a culture that allow its members to engage spontaneously in everyday social behavior without continually having to "guess" what other people are going to do. More formally, we can say that norms and rules are sets of expected behaviors for particular situations.

The dimensions of cultural variability (e.g., individualism-collectivism), values, and communication norms and rules that predominate in our culture influence how we transmit messages and interpret incoming stimuli when we communicate with strangers. Consider, for example, a visit to North America by strangers from a culture with a communication rule requiring that direct eye contact always be avoided. When interacting with these strangers, North Americans will try to establish direct eye contact. If the strangers do not look them in the eye when talking, the North Americans will assume that the strangers either have something to hide or are not telling the truth, since the communication rule in North America requires direct eye contact to establish one's sincerity. A rule of North American culture, therefore, has influenced the way in which North Americans interpret the strangers' behavior. It should be noted, however, that there are some subcultures in North America (e.g., the lower-class African American subculture) where this rule may not be applicable. We discuss cultural influences in detail in Chapter 3.

Sociocultural Influences

The sociocultural influences are those involved in the social ordering process. As indicated in Chapter 1, social ordering develops out of our interactions with others when the patterns of behavior become consistent over time (Olsen, 1978). We are members of groups either because we are born into them or because we join them. Groups we are born into include, but are not limited to, racial and ethnic groups, families, age groups, and gender groups. Groups we join include service groups (e.g., the Lions Club), occupational groups, religious groups, and ideological groups (e.g., Democratic and Republican parties, the Ku Klux Klan), to name only a few. The various groups of which we are members enforce sets of expected behaviors (norms and rules) and have shared values and, therefore, have an impact on how we communicate with strangers.

Our membership in social groups influences the way we see ourselves. Our self-concept is composed of at least two components: social identity and personal identity. Our social identities are derived from our membership in our social groups. Our personal identities are based on our unique individual experiences. The degree to which we identify with our groups and feel comfortable about ourselves as individuals influences our communication with strangers.

When we communicate with another person and make our predictions on the basis of a position that person holds in a group, we are engaging in a role relationship. The idea of position can best be illustrated by examples: clerk, judge, father, mother, boss, physician, professor, student, and so on. People filling one of these positions are expected to perform certain behaviors. The set of behaviors they are expected to perform is referred to as their role. Our role expectations influence how we interpret behavior and what predictions we make about people in a given role. Role expectations vary within any culture, but there is a tendency for them to vary more across cultures. If we do not know strangers' role expectations, we inevitably will make inaccurate interpretations and predictions about their behavior.

Psychocultural Influences

The variables included under the psychocultural influences are those involved in the personal ordering process. Personal ordering, you will recall, is the process giving stability to psychological processes. The variables influencing our communication with strangers include our stereotypes of and attitudes toward (e.g., ethnocentrism and prejudice) strangers' groups. Our stereotypes and attitudes create expectations of how strangers will behave. Our expectations, in turn, influence the way in which we interpret incoming stimuli and the predictions we make about strangers' behavior. Being highly ethnocentric, for example, leads us to interpret strangers' behavior from our own cultural frame of reference and to expect strangers to behave the same way we do. Using our frame of reference invariably leads to misinterpretations of the strangers' messages, as well as inaccurate predictions about their future behavior.

The influence of our expectations on our interpretation of strangers' behavior is mediated through the uncertainty and anxiety we are experiencing. If we are highly uncertain and/or anxious, we cannot interpret strangers' behavior accurately. If we are to communicate effectively, our anxiety needs to be sufficiently low so that we can make accurate predictions of strangers' behavior. We discuss psychocultural influences in detail in Chapter 5.

Environmental Influences

The environment in which we communicate influences our transmitting and interpreting of messages. The geographical location, climate, and architectural setting, as well as our perceptions of the environment, influence how we interpret incoming stimuli and the predictions we make about strangers' behavior. Since strangers may have different perceptions of and orientations toward the environment, they may interpret behavior differently in the same setting. As an illustration, a North American visiting a Colombian family would expect to engage in informal interaction in the living room. The Colombian host, on the other hand, probably would define the living room as a place for formal behavior. Each, therefore, would interpret the other's behavior in light of his or her own expectations and make predictions about the other's behavior on the basis of those same expectations. Such a situation, in all likelihood, would lead to misunderstanding. We discuss environmental influences in Chapter 6.

SUMMARY

Communication with people from our own culture, with people from other races or ethnic groups, and with people from other cultures shares the same underlying process. While communication in these different situations differs in degree, it does not differ in kind. Various names are available to label communication in these different situations, but ambiguity exists as to which label is appropriate for certain situations. Communication between a white person from South Africa and an African American person from the United States, for example, can be labeled as either intercultural or interracial communication.

Given the similarity of the underlying process of communication and the confusion in applying the various labels, we believe what is needed is a way to refer to the underlying process without referring to a particular situation. Talking about communication with strangers is a way to accomplish this end. Strangers can be conceived of as people who are unknown and unfamiliar and are confronting a group for the first time. An African American student in a mainly European American school, a Mexican student studying at a university in the United States, a groom meeting the bride's family for the first time, and a manager from the United States working in Thailand are all examples of strangers.

Intergroup communication is guided by our social identities and involves predicting strangers' behavior using cultural and sociocultural data. Interpersonal

communication, in contrast, is guided by our personal identities and involves predicting others' behavior using psychological data. Both interpersonal and intergroup factors are present in virtually any encounter we have with another person. To communicate effectively in interpersonal or intergroup situations, we have to manage our anxiety and uncertainty. To accomplish this goal, we must be mindful. Being mindful involves creating new categories, being open to new information, and being aware of alternative perspectives.

Our communication with strangers is influenced by our conceptual filters, just as their communication with us is influenced by their filters. Our conceptual filters can be placed into four categories: cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental. Each of these types of filters influences how we interpret messages encoded by strangers and what predictions we make about strangers' behavior. Without understanding strangers' filters, we cannot accurately interpret or predict their behavior.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the concept of the stranger help link interpersonal and intergroup communication?
2. Why is anxiety a typical reaction to encountering strangers?
3. Why is there greater uncertainty when we encounter strangers than when we encounter people who are familiar?
4. Why do misunderstandings occur when our uncertainty is below our minimum threshold?
5. How does uncertainty change over time as we communicate with others?
6. What factors influence the amount of uncertainty we have when we communicate with strangers?
7. Why do we have anxiety when we communicate with strangers?
8. Why do we make inaccurate predictions of strangers' behavior when our anxiety is above our maximum threshold?
9. How does anxiety change over time when we communicate with others?
10. What factors increase our anxiety when we communicate with strangers?
11. What are the consequences of high levels of anxiety?
12. What are the characteristics of mindfulness?
13. Why do we need to focus on being mindful of the process of communication (as opposed to the outcome) to communicate effectively with strangers?

SUGGESTED READING

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