Unit 5 Intercultural Communication

Overview. This unit focuses on the role of communication in the relationships of peoples and groups with different cultural, ethnic, religious or social backgrounds. It looks at both the cultural barriers to effective communication as well as to various ways those barriers can be overcome. This unit also addresses the concept of dialogue as the use of communication to achieve harmony, mutual understanding and respect among peoples and groups.

Learning Outcomes: Students who complete Unit 5 will be able to:
- explain the role of ethnocentrism in intercultural communication
- discuss guidelines for effective intercultural and interreligious communication
- compare Arabic and English communication patterns
- demonstrate intercultural aspects of inter-religious communication

Key Concepts for Unit 5
- Definition and conceptualization of *intercultural communication* and overview of guidelines
- Overview of *ethnocentrism* and *prejudice* in communication
- Definition and conceptualization of *dialogue* as a model of communication

► Intercultural Communication

Nations and people of the world are increasingly interconnected and mutually interdependent. Globally, most cities and countries are becoming more diverse internally, with citizens and residents of varying races, religions, ethnicities and national backgrounds. Meanwhile, greater the risk is associated with economic or political aloofness and social isolation. All of these social forces are fostering increasingly more study of intercultural communication.

Specifically, intercultural communication is defined as communication, and the study of it, among peoples of different cultural, ethnic and tribal backgrounds. Because of the inherent differences between the message sender/encoder and the message receiver/decoder, the risk of misunderstanding is particularly high in intercultural situations.

The symbolic aspect of communication and its reliance on encoding and decoding are particularly important in intercultural communication, which encompasses both verbal and nonverbal elements. The differences between languages obviously can hamper communication, but so too (though less obviously) can varying ways that people of different cultures use nonverbal elements of body language, gaze, touch, time and so on.

In some instances, intercultural communication began as an attempt by a dominant, often the host society, to acculturize new immigrants. However, the field has grown toward the kind of communication associated with dialogue [see definition in Unit 1].

An important aspect of intercultural communication is an understanding of social roles and expectations within various cultures. Specifically this refers to role relationships.

- <u>Personalness</u> deals with what is expected and tolerated. This varies greatly, from the reserve of Asian society to the gregariousness of Latin and Mediterranean cultures.

- <u>Formality</u> is a related area, often focusing on existing relationships such as teacher-student, doctor-patient, salesman-buyer. A practical aspect of this is the issue of whether to use first names or surnames and whether to accompany these with honorifics such as "mister" in English or "san" in Japanese.

- <u>Social hierarchy</u> focuses on cultural norms, particularly those associated with authority or station in life. In some cultures, social deference is very important; in others, social equality is the norm. This varies greatly throughout the world, but can even be found in cultures of similar background. Columbia, for example, is quite formal and class is most important. In neighboring Venezuela, though, lack of class distinctions is evident not only in behavior but also in language.

- The <u>degree of allowable deviation</u> is another element in intercultural communication, dealing with acceptable looseness or tightness within a social system and whether the emphasis is place on individual rights and freedoms or on group cohesiveness and social values. Focus on this element leads to distinguishing between two types of societies: <u>individualistic cultures</u> that value individual freedom, choice and uniqueness, and <u>collectivist cultures</u> that value the group over the individual.

- The <u>degree of uncertainty</u> allowable in society is another distinguishing characteristic of intercultural communication. <u>Uncertainty-accepting cultures</u> tolerate ambiguity and diversity, whereas <u>uncertainty-rejecting societies</u> have difficulty with ambiguity and diversity.

- <u>Social explicitness</u> is another indicator of differences among cultures. <u>Implicit-rule cultures</u> have information and cultural roles that are known by all participants, though perhaps unknown by outsiders. These roles and norms often are imbedded in cultural traditions and customs. <u>Explicit-rule cultures</u> have rules, procedures and expectations that are documented and discussed, often having the force of law.

► **Terms and Concepts in Intercultural Communication**

- <u>Etic</u> is a communication term referring to the understanding or explanation of a culture from outside. <u>Emic</u> refers to understanding or explanation of a culture from within.

- <u>Culture</u> is the dynamic and living (or once-living) patterns that define a society, including its characteristic beliefs, attitudes, habits and behaviors. Aspects of culture include language, religion, nationality, ethnicity, values, customs, family and social structures, and so on. Being part of a culture is learned, initially from parents and family, later from widening social surroundings. Culture also incorporates symbols, rituals, values, heroes and myths, which combine to help both transmit and reinforce the culture.

- <u>Race</u> is a term used to define people by physical or sociohistorical characteristics according to their common ancestry. <u>Ethnicity</u> (sometimes <u>tribal identify</u>) refers to groups within a race who share a common culture. Both terms are undergoing change.

- Intracultural communication is the study of communication within a particular cultural or social group. Intercultural communication is the study of communication among various cultures. Subcategories include inter-racial communication (between people of different races), interethnic communication (between people of different ethnic background within the same race), inter-religious communication (between people of different religious affiliations or backgrounds), interdenominational communication (between people of different sects or denominations within a single religion). Cross-cultural communication is the study of a particular idea or interaction within one culture, compared with the same idea or interaction within other cultures.

- A co-culture or microculture (less appropriately called a subculture) is a particularly recognizable cultural subgroup whose beliefs, values, customs and other aspects of culture distinguish it from the larger society of which it is a part. In the United States, for example, there are many co-cultures, such as Native American, Muslim American, Latin American. Within any culture, such co-cultures may be based on race, ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, age and so on. For examples, adolescents or the elderly might be considered a co-culture.

- An in-group is a dominant or referent group within a culture. Specifically, an in-group is a group of people with whom we identify, associate and cooperate, and about whom we are concerned. Conversely, an out-group is a group within a culture with whom we do not associate or cooperate and about whom we are not particularly concerned. Examples of out-groups are people of other races or religions, citizens of other nations, members of other political parties or movements, members of other professions, members of the opposite sex, and people of different ages from oneself. The tendency to make a distinction between in-groups and out-groups is nearly universal.

- The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also called the principle of linguistic relativity) is an observation named after two American linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, who noted the relationship between language and culture. Specifically, they believed that language is necessary for thought, and that certain thoughts of a person cannot be understood by someone using a different language. They further argued that a person's world view is largely determined by his or her vocabulary and by the language structure of his culture.

- Within a multicultural environment, assimilation is the process of giving up one culture and taking on the characteristics of another, either a separate culture or a compromise culture. The alternative process is cultural pluralism, which involves maintaining one's particular culture in the midst of larger society. Many societies, particularly those with a dominant culture, encourage assimilation. Sometimes this carries the force of government, such as requirements imposed through official languages or religious laws. However, in societies composed of people from different cultural background, often the variety and size of those co-cultures allow their members to exist in a pluralistic manner and remain different from the larger society.

► **Ethnocentrism**

The study of intercultural communication often deals with problems or areas of risk. One such problem is ethnocentrism, the tendency to put one's own culture in the center of influence and use it as the point of reference for everything else. In many ways, this is a natural human tendency. Nationality, religion, ethnicity and culture all give us an identity, a sense of who we are and how we fit in with the world. They become our reference points.

The difficulty, however, is that ethnocentrism also sets up standards of good and bad when in fact the issue should merely be noting differences. For example, there is nothing inherently good or correct about a nation that designs roads, passes laws, and builds cars all for the purpose of driving on the left side of the highway, any more than a nation that selects the right as the appropriate driving lane. Yet people used to driving on one side will say (or at least think) that people in the other-lane countries are driving "on the wrong side of the road."

It is relatively easy to recognize the ethnocentrism in such an example and to vow to avoid it. The problem is significantly more difficult when it comes to dealing with deeper issues – raising children, worshipping God, establishing standards of public decency, and so on.

The opposite of ethnocentrism is cultural relativism, which involves the analysis and assessment of a culture based on its own context rather than one's own culture. This involves setting aside one's own cultural background and, without bias, understanding and assessing another culture.

Another problem associated with ethnocentrism is a phenomenon called ethnopaulism, using name-calling or slurs for members of the out-group. The consequence of all this is greater social distance between both cultures and less mutual understanding.

The concept of social distance can be used in the study of ethnocentrism and ethnopaulism. Specifically, five types of distance can be observed:

- The distance of disparagement arises when two groups compete for the same resources. Such situations lead to relationships that are very high in ethnocentrism and very low in cultural relativism. It gives rise to frequent incidents of ethnopaulism.

- The distance of avoidance likewise exists in an environment high in ethnocentrism and low in cultural relativism. It leads to frequent and exaggerated instances of in-group jargon.

- The distance of indifference involves moderate levels of both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism associated with an insensitivity to the concerns of others and the use of ethnically disparaging terms.

- The distance of sensitivity is based on a low level of ethnocentrism and a high level of cultural pluralism. In this situation, speech is used deliberately to reduce the social distance between cultural groups.

- The distance of equality exists within an environment of a very low level of ethnocentrism and a very high level of cultural pluralism. Speech at this distance avoids making judgments against others.

► **Prejudice and Communication**

Another problem for intercultural communication is prejudice, a judgment made on the basis of past experience rather than an evaluation of present circumstances. In theory, prejudice can be positive or negative, but in practice it is associated with negative judgments and bias. Like ethnocentrism, prejudice tends to emphasize "my" values at the expense of "your" values. Related to this is stereotyping, a judgment made on the basis of communicated information rather than personal experience. (See Unit 4 for more information about stereotyping.)

Prejudice can be individual or institutional.

- Individual prejudice is focused on cultural out-groups, such as members of other races, religions or lifestyles.

- Institutional prejudice is imbedded in organizations. It may not be conscious, but it gives evidence of discrimination against members of cultural out-groups in situations such as university or hospital admission policies, hiring practices, housing, and transportation security screening.

Social psychologists suggest that prejudice is not a dichotomy (meaning that either a person is prejudiced or not) but rather a continuum (everybody is prejudiced to one degree or another). Racism, sexism, ageism, bias for or against people of particular religions or nationalities is a natural and unavoidable result of being socialized in a particular culture. Like ethnocentrism, prejudice is related to a person's general feeling about strangers and people who are different from oneself.

People high in prejudice seek to minimize contact with strangers; people low in prejudice seek to interact with strangers. Psychologists note that while people young and old show a preference for interacting with their own races, this does not necessarily lead to prejudice for people of other races.

Surveys suggest that prejudice is decreasing, in part through the impact of communication, both interpersonal and mass. As we learn more about other people and increase our direct and/or mediated experiences with them, we are less likely to exhibit high levels of prejudice.

Additionally, research shows that younger people are less prejudiced than older people. This lessening of prejudice has been documented across boundaries of race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual lifestyle and occupation.

Four causes have been linked to prejudice:

- Intergroup anxiety (socially reinforced fears and hostilities).

- Realistic threats to the existence or well being of the in-group.

- Symbolic threats involving perceived differences in values and customs.

- Negative stereotypes giving rise to negative expectations about members of out-groups.

The communication of prejudice may be subtle or explicit. Explicit examples of prejudiced communication are extreme symbols such as the swastika, hate speech designed to cause physical or emotional violence against a group of people, and written discriminatory policies such as laws that prevent members of a particular religion from voting or owning property.

More subtle prejudiced communication can occur in various levels: interpersonal, institutional and mass.

- An example of prejudice in interpersonal communication situations is a family member who models prejudice against an out-group.

- The level of institutional/organizational communication becomes prejudices in situations such as with the requirement to use the language of the in-group.

- As the mass communication level, prejudice may be exhibited in the use of ethnic, racial or religious stereotypes in books and movies. People sometimes blame their prejudices on the media.

► Guidelines for Intercultural Communication

Here are some guidelines drawn from communication research and practice that can foster better communication among various cultures.

- Understand your own culture and communication variables such as social role, symbolism, thought patterns, worldview, silence and particularly the various nonverbal aspects of communication (chronemics, kinesics, proxemics and so on).

- Learn the communication rules for the other culture by reflecting on its approach to nonverbal and other aspects of communication. Be sensitive to verbal and nonverbal language codes, and use language appropriate for the culture or co-culture with which you are trying to communicate.

- Approach intercultural communication with a positive attitude and with the goal of understanding the other side rather than preaching about or defending your own.

- Avoid ethnocentrism that interprets everything on the basis of your own social and cultural values. Instead, try to understand how a concept, product or practice fits into the other culture.

- Be flexible, and be on the lookout for cues that suggest you should change your own communication style or your interpretation of the communication style of the other person.

► Arabic and English Comparisons

A study by R.S. Zaharna at American University in Washington D.C. looked at intercultural communication with an application to public relations and a focus on Arab and American cultures. He cautioned that the comparisons are necessarily overly simplistic because of the complexity of the cultures, not only the growing multi-cultural aspect of the United States but the variety of cultural pattern across the Arab countries. Nevertheless, some useful observations emerged from his study [Zaharna, R.S. (1995), Bridging cultural differences: American public relations practices and Arab communication patterns. In *Public Relations Review*, 21, 241-255].

- High-context and low contest. Using a well-known continuum in intercultural studies, Zaharna studied the difference between high-context cultures (in which much meaning is imbedded in social context and nonverbal communication) and low-context cultures (where the code or verbal language carries the meaning). He concluded that the Arab culture is high-context and the burden of meaning falls on the listener, and American culture is low-context and the burden of meaning falls on the speaker.

- Indirect and direct. Direct communication styles are those that are concise and unambiguous, using language to present facts; indirect styles use language to evoke emotion and tolerate nuance and ambiguity. He judges Arabic to be indirect and English as direct.

- Doing and being. Another cultural divide comes from two different value orientations, one focusing on activity and valuing achievement and accomplishments, the other on being or becoming, valuing connectedness. Zaharna concludes that American culture is doing-oriented, while Arab culture is being-focused.

- <u>Oral and literate</u>. Anthropologists have noted distinctions between oral versus literate societies. The former are focused on intuition, anecdote and metaphor; the latter favor evidence, reasoning and analysis. He labels American culture as literate and Arab as historically oral.

- <u>Linear and nonlinear</u>. Similarly, scholars have observed differences between cultures in their thought frameworks. Linear societies stress beginnings and endings, empirical use of evidence, and an orientation toward objects. Nonlinear cultures focus on multiple themes and have less of an emphasis on time and time segmentation. Zaharna places American culture in the linear camp and Arab culture in the nonlinear.

Zaharna notes the power of language in the two cultures. Arabic is a language of poetry and metaphor, a religious language, and a language associated with contemporary nationalism that both defines and distinguishes Arabs. English, meanwhile, epitomizes Americans as people of action who favor directness, accountability and efficiency.

Another set of studies looks specifically at American and Arab values, noting that differing values often hamper communication between the two cultures. One study reported as American values such concepts as materialism, success, activity, progress, rationality, democracy and humanitarianism. Arab culture, meanwhile, has been assessed as prizing the traditional Bedouin values of hospitality, generosity, courage, honor and self-respect. Clearly different sets of values, both useful in particular circumstances, but both capable of misunderstanding the other.

► Dialogue

<u>Dialogue</u> is a highly evolved form of communication that finds practical application in situations such as intercultural or inter-religious discourse, diplomacy and negotiation. It is a process of communication aimed at learning about and sharing with another person or group. It is communication with the goal mutual understanding, which operates in an environment of mutual trust and respect and the avoidance of hidden agendas.

Dialogue has been called "revealing communication" because it is clear, open and honest. It also is considered the most difficult level of communication to achieve because, as the shared exploration of ideas, dialogue is oriented toward both the understanding and resolution of differences between peoples, groups or organizations.

From a philosophical perspective, dialogue is more than a mutual agreement to disagree or an environment of tolerance of differences. Rather, it is an authentic cooperative search for understanding and direction. Martin Buber (1878-1965) set forth several criteria for genuine dialogue.

- When people interact genuinely, they go beyond themselves to encounter the other person as an equal.

- One participates in genuine dialogue without distortion.

- Genuine dialogue focuses on the message and not on how that message might be received by others.

- All participants in genuine dialogue must be willing and able to share fully.

Intergroup conflict is a growing and widespread phenomenon, in many ways fostered by advances in communication and growing presence of world-wide media that increase the likelihood that formerly separated groups come into contact with each other. Here are some characteristics of intergroup conflicts:

- Perceived differences, whether real or not, that deal with the social identity and mutual stereotypes

- Territorial claims and "turf" issues

- Significant difference in power and resources between or among the groups in conflict

- Differences in terminology or connotation, which underlie different values and attitudes

- Different styles for managing and resolving conflict

- Often significant racial, ethnic or religious differences which separate the parties in the conflict

► Inter-religious Dialogue

A particular area of intercultural communication deals with the dialogue between various religious groups. Some of these dialogues exist within a particular religious family, such as Catholic-Lutheran or Anglican-Orthodox dialogues. Others exist within a broader circle, such as Christian-Buddhist dialogues or dialogues among the historic Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In each instance, the focus of the dialogue is on mutual understanding and respect, perhaps with the practical goal to develop areas of mutual activities, often in the areas of humanitarianism or the promotion of peace and nonviolence.

Inter-religious dialogue is a particularly difficult form of intercultural communication, because historically the various religions often have been either players or pawn in relationships that were sometimes hostile, violent and bloody. Islam remembers the Crusades, and Western society distrusts Islamic fundamentalism associated with much of world terrorism today. So the dialogic principles of mutual respect and integrity often are difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, all of the world religions have within their scriptures teachings that call for respect, compassion, pursuit of truth and tolerance.

Catholic Cardinal Avery Dulles has identified a typology of four models of how various religions relate to each other.

- Coercion has been the mode for much of history, and religious persecution has been more prevalent than religious pluralism. The pattern of a single religion for a nation was the political norm until early modern times, but modern means of travel and communication lead to more pluralistic societies, and increasingly fewer nations are populated solely by adherents of a single religion. These days, forced conversions are both practically useless and theologically repudiated by most religions.

- Toleration as a model for inter-religious relations means not necessarily approval of other religions or their beliefs, but rather the acceptance of their existence. Tolerance is peaceful co-existence, based on the notion that something can be accepted either because it cannot be suppressed or because suppression itself would be evil. This essentially is the perspective of most democratic nations. Toleration exists within an awareness and acceptance of differences. It

does not require the conclusion that all religions are equally correct, only that each has an equal right to believe and practice as it does.

- <u>Pluralism</u> is a model of religious encounter that views the existence of different religions as a blessing. It includes an opportunity to observe truth in its various forms and manifestations, and it also creates an environment in which each religion needs to be true to its own beliefs and practices. This is a relativist approach that does not appeal to the hard-line "true believers" of any religious persuasion.

- <u>Convergence</u> is a model of inter-religious relationships which seeks to blend the various religions into one. This is the social ideal for some, but one with few practical outcomes. Even within the same religious families, the strength of social and theological tradition is so strong that the notion of religious convergence is not generally seen as practical.

Dulles observes that several means are available to encourage inter-religious dialogue, including mutual education, joint programs based on common recognition of basic moral values, bearing of common witness to shared convictions, and occasional celebration of interfaith services of prayer and worship. He also cited a critical need for the healing of memories in which past injustices are acknowledged, with apologizes given and accepted.

Here are some principles for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue:

- Dialogue is possible only in a relationship of <u>mutual respect and knowledge</u> of the other culture as well as one's own culture and tradition. Real communication is possible only in the presence of mutual understanding.

- Dialogue is possible only within an <u>environment of authenticity</u>, in which each participant has full understanding and acceptance in his/her own religious heritage, as well as a similar understanding and acceptance of the other.

- Acceptance means more than tolerance. Without any loss of self, it involves the <u>embrace of the other</u> in respect to culture, customs, traditions, and so on.

- Because both social and religious culture is deeply rooted in and expressed through a <u>particular social tradition</u>, differences among religions should be seen as appropriately facts that distinguish them rather than points of exclusivity or superiority.

- Dialogue can be enhanced by a joint commitment to and action on <u>common social issues</u>.

- Dialogue allows for the <u>mutual reassessment</u> of interrelated history, which in turn permits both a new understanding of the other as well as the potential emergence of a common understanding of the past and awareness of its role in current relationships.

APPENDIX TO UNIT 5

► **Relevant Web Sites**

www.pertinent.com/articles/communication/index.asp – Articles about intercultural communication

www.intercultural.org – Intercultural Communication Institute

www.stephweb.com/forum – Intermundo, Journal for Intercultural Communication

www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr99.html – United States Institute for Peace special report "Building interreligious trust in a climate of fear: An Abraham trialogue"

hcr.oupjournals.org/ – Journal of Human Communication Research, Journal of Communication

www.ejcr.org – European Journal of Communication Research

► **Relevant Books**

Bryant, M.D., & Flinn, F. (eds.). (1989). *Interreligious dialogue: Voices from a new frontier*. New York: Paragon.

Collier, M.J. (ed). (2002). *Intercultural alliance: Critical transformation* (vol. XXV). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W.B. (2004). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (4th ed). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W.B. & Kim, Y.Y (2002). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (4th edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Jandt, F.E. (2004). *An introduction to intercultural communication: Identifies in a global community* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Kim, M-S. (2002). *Non-western perspectives on human communication: Implications for theory and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Martin, J.N., & Nakayama, T.K. (2005). *Experiencing intercultural communication: an introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Neuliep, J.W. (2003). *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

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

Rogers, E.M. & Steinfatt, T.M. (1999). *Intercultural communication*. Prospect Heights IL: Waveland.

Samovar, L.A., & Porter, R.E. (2000). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont CA: Wadsworth.

Samovar, L.A., Porter, R.E., & Stefani, L.A. (1998). *Communication between cultures* (3rd ed). Belmont CA: Wadsworth.

Ulin, R.C. (2001). *Understanding cultures: Perspectives in anthology and social theory* (2nd ed). Malden MA: Blackwell.

► Unit Quiz

Define ethnopaulism.

Give an example of changing social attitudes toward prejudice.

Give examples of the distance of avoidance, the distance of equality, and the distance of disparagement.

Define prejudice.

Give an example of a co-culture.

Give an example of an uncertainty-accepting culture and an implicit-rule culture.

Define cultural relativism.

► Freewrite and Discussion

Discuss the role the ethnocentrism plays in your social environment.

Discuss how degree of formality or degree of personalness affects communication in intercultural situations.

Note who/what you consider your in-group, and give examples of groups within your society who you consider to be out-groups. Discuss the reasons for making these distinctions.

Explain both the advantages and disadvantages of cultural assimilation and of cultural pluralism.

Discuss whether you agree or disagree with Professor Zaharna about the differences between American and Arab cultures and communication patterns.

► Exercises

Interview somebody who has spent time in a country with a dominant culture different from home. Obtain some examples of things that he or she observed which, if done back home, would have been interpreted differently than they were in that culture. Did he overlook the behavior? Obtain some examples of things that he did in the different culture that he would not have done at home because it would have been inappropriate.