

## INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF CONNECTING TO EACH OTHER

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### INTRO: WHY DO WE NEED AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH?

There is a somewhat widespread naïve misconception concerning the role of cultural differences in communication, that goes more or less like this: with sufficient openness, good will and curiosity we can overcome the potential obstacles that cultural differences impose on us, limiting our capacity to recognize each other. The deep misunderstanding within this idea is that these obstacles do not stem from ill intentions, but from the very limits of our system of perception (the way we collect, categorise and interpret information) as well as from the intergroup dynamics of social identities and ethnocentrism (that we are all motivated to see our own groups as nicer, wiser, and better). It is for these two reasons that cultural differences will affect our interactions and will need to be tackled in any training wishing to help young people connect to each other.

Culture does matter, and to find “cultural difference” we don’t necessarily need to cross national borders: cultural differences can appear amongst urban and rural populations, different regions, districts of the same city, different genders, sexual orientations, groups connected to different physical abilities, to sexual orientations, musical subcultures etc. Cultural difference - or diversity - can play out in two different ways in social situations. First, it can imply differences in values and practices: for instance some say hello by kissing, by shaking hands, some by bowing, and some by a sophisticated choreography of hand and shoulder touches and pats. Second, whenever people can be categorised as belonging to specific cultures, the dynamics of categorisation and social identities will appear. The categories activate stereotypes and preconceptions: we do not see the other only as a unique individual, but one of a particular age, ethnicity, gender etc., with all the associations it may have. However, we have to be cautious with both perspectives, reminding ourselves that membership to particular group does not define the other person. Each person has a unique way of integrating the many cultures s.he is part of, juggling with multiple identities in each situation, in relation to the others in the interaction, adding a unique touch to each identity through his/her personal life journey. A proper intercultural approach should help us to avoid two possible mistakes: ignoring cultural factors when they are there or to the contrary forcing a cultural explanation instead of other factors (personality, situation). Please remember these two risks while you read the chapter.

Culture does matter, and it affects the learning of “how to connect to each other” at least in three different ways. In the following we’ll tackle these three perspectives. First, we’ll explore the cultural differences in communication: what diversity can we observe in the way people from different cultures go about communication? We then explore the dimensions of cultural differences that can have an impact on cooperation in a class or training room. Finally, we’ll open the concept of acculturation, exploring the process of adaptation and change that migrants, or members of minorities may experience.

### 1. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

Different cultures do not inhabit different universes, and in many ways they are more similar to one another than different, but the differences they display are not negligible, nor superficial. Most of all, they may imply specific challenges in the process of learning to communicate in other languages. Let’s start by exploring the diversity in communication. Being able to know, interpret and use the appropriate expressions is referred to as “sociolinguistic competence” (Burlleson 2007: 106) if we also include non-verbal behaviours we’ll talk about intercultural communication competence. Such a competence has to accommodate to at least four types of differences:

- Preference for formal or informal style: the dominant style in France is much more formal than in Hungary or Finland. It is expected to add "Monsieur" or "Madame" to the greetings, a "good afternoon" alone can be considered impolite. This by no means implies that the French in general are more polite. Merely it expresses that (statistically and generally) they attribute more importance to form, to the way that thoughts are presented.

- The repertoires of non-verbal communication differ greatly: in some cultures direct eye contact is expected, failure to keep eye-contact raises suspicion and lack of honesty. The length of silences that are tolerated differ greatly etc. There are different prescriptions for all the facets of nonverbal communication: kinesics (gestures, body position, etc), haptics (touching), proxemics (distance), physical appearance, vocalics (modulations of the voice, rhythm, silences etc.), chronemics (expectations towards duration in time), artifacts (use of objects, arrangements) (Afifi 2007). Not only there are differences in the meanings of the different gestures, but also in the extent to which they are used in communication. Again as a general tendency, Italians tend to use more and bigger gestures to accompany their verbal messages, than the Japanese. At the same time Japanese would attribute great importance to non-verbal communication, but using it on a smaller scale, possibly even replacing verbal communication more often than the Italian would do.

- Hall proposes the distinction between high and low-context communication styles. High-context style would imply that contextual elements such as dresses, artifacts, postures and gestures have more importance in decoding the message; while in low-context settings the meaning is mainly carried by verbal communication.

- To what extent we are allowed to show the emotions we feel in interaction, or to the contrary we're expected to hide them is also a cultural variable. This dimension of exteriorization of emotions is not the same as feeling them, but cultures where the communication style embraces manifestations of the inner affective world would see the others as cold or insensitive.

Furthermore, the cultural codes of communication are not independent from the other value orientations, representations and norms that characterise a given culture. This is the reason why the means of communication that people use are often very difficult to change: they are not simple behaviour patterns that are arbitrarily chosen, but rather they are the top of an iceberg of underlying norms, values and representations that are expressed in interaction. Consider this example: *A female trainer wishes to welcome all new students introducing herself to them with a handshake. She extends her hand towards Abdullah also, but he does not take it.*

In the situation above the new student would be technically quite able to shake the hand of the teacher. What prevents him from doing so is the representation of a need of separation between the sexes. According to his cultural beliefs, the difference between men and women is important and should not be reduced. One way to honour this desire of differentiation is by establishing different communication rules for men to men and men to women interactions. Some of these differences may influence the way we'll communicate (such as gender, hierarchy or time orientation), and they will also influence process of learning the language.

## 2. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AFFECTING THE LEARNING PROCESS

As we've seen before cultural differences the way we communicate, either through specific norms and rules concerning different means of communication either

by reflecting underlying cultural values. These value orientations and differences can also have an impact on how young people will be able to engage in our trainings and workshops and they may trigger some challenges the trainer will have to address. Let's have a look at the dimensions most likely to interfere in the process<sup>1</sup>:

- **Tendency to accentuate or decrease the separation or distinction between genders:** cultures cherishing the distinction of genders tend to make different prescriptions for people of different genders concerning self-presentation (dress code, way of speaking), communication, social roles and professional choices. They can also prescribe the physical separation of genders or forbid physical contact between men and women who are not family members. Cultures oriented toward the reduction will have the opposite preferences: similar self-presentations, interchangeable roles, non-discriminated professional choices, preference for mixed groups. **In the training context:** this dimension may have an impact on how male students relate to female trainers and students.

- **Refusal or acceptance of hierarchy:** members of societies where hierarchy has more importance will better tolerate differences in power distribution; will be more likely to accept an instruction or explanation coming from an authoritarian position and will be less likely to challenge the authority. **In the training context** this dimension will have an impact on how students respond to the trainer, whether or not they dare to express disagreement, ask questions etc.

- **Orientation towards individualism or collectivism:** people in an individualist orientation will be more oriented towards expressing assertively their own wishes and needs while the interdependent / collectivist orientation will focus on the group process and harmony between members. **In the training context** this dimension will have an impact on the motivation of particular students to express themselves in front of the others, to formulate own opinions, to "stand out".

- **Task or relationship-orientation:** task-oriented people will focus on their goal rather than the relations. This difference will show during collaborations and in particular during conflicts. Relationship-oriented participants will be more accommodating while task-oriented group members won't hesitate to go against the status quo if they feel that the task can be improved.

- **Monochronic or polychronic time orientation:** linear orientation implies sequential turn-taking in speaking: we wait for the speaker before us to finish before starting, otherwise we'll appear as rude. Polychronic orientation can allow us to tune into the other's sentence, not waiting for her to finish. **In the training context** this dimension will have an impact on the time management: will students arrive exactly on time or will the starting and ending moment be considered as flexible and negotiable.

### 3. THE ACCULTURATION PROCESS

Even if you had never heard the concept of "acculturation" before, you may have intuitions and expectations about the wider subject matter: how migrants change or should change through their exposure to the new cultural environment. Consider the following examples and check whether some options seem better than the others:

1. The son of Chinese migrants living in Paris decides not to have Chinese friends, and is looking for a Parisian girlfriend. Having alienated his Chinese friends but not having yet managed to make French friends in the end he spends quite some time alone.

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<sup>1</sup> For « gender » and « hierarchy » see our descriptions of "sensitive zones" for further details

2. A Venezuelan woman takes classes from an actor to be able to get rid of her accent completely so that no one realizes she's a foreigner
3. The Chinese migrants working in the restoration business are trying to find a nice Chinese young woman for their son
4. A migrant woman who arrived to France twenty years ago has only elementary knowledge of French language. She's never really needed it before.
5. A young woman decides to wear the veil when she turns 18 to mark her identity as a modern French Muslim and feminist woman.
6. Young people of diverse cultural origins living in a "migrant suburb" have developed a language that integrates words from their different languages and is marked by a special accent that is not directly connected to any of their original languages. They use it amongst themselves but also when they interact with members of the dominant society.

The concept of "acculturation strategies" tries to explain in a systematic way how people change in the new cultural environment. In 1987, John W. Berry (1980) created the model that would become the most cited explanation. Berry proposes to classify the acculturation strategies of migrants and minority members based on their answers to two questions: "is it important to engage in relations with members of the new environment?" and "is it valued to maintain relations with the original cultural environment?". From these two questions, four acculturation strategies emerge: integration, segregation, assimilation and marginalization.

- **Marginalisation** takes place when individuals don't engage with either their culture of origin or the dominant culture. It may either happen due to limited possibilities of interaction with members of the host culture (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination) and because of a lack of interest in cultural maintenance. This may lead to isolation from both cultural groups (host as well as culture of origin). In our first example the Chinese young man finds himself at least temporarily in this situation. The marginalisation strategy has been associated with psychosomatic with psychosomatic and adjustment disorders (Berry, 1994).

- **Assimilation** occurs when individuals reject their minority culture and adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture. They seek daily interaction with the host culture and their ambition is to become accepted as part of the majority culture. Among other things, assimilation has been associated with a weakening of the immune system (Schmitz 1992, Ward et al. 2008:93) and it is often reported to bring about higher levels of acculturation stress and dissatisfaction (e.g. La Fromboise 1993:397). It is assumed that this negative relationship between assimilation and well-being is due to the fact that complete assimilation is rarely possible. Visual markers, names and accents often highlight the strangeness of immigrants, and they are still perceived as foreigners after many years in the host country. Those engaging in an assimilation journey often face a gap between their self-perception and the perception that members of the host society send back to them.

- **Separation** occurs when individuals reject the dominant or host culture in favour of preserving their culture of origin. In this case, they focus on keeping their own values and avoid contact with the majority culture as much as possible. Separation is often facilitated by immigration to ethnic enclaves. The separation strategy has been associated with high levels of neuroticism, anxiety and psychoticism, cardiovascular problems as well as addiction to drugs and alcohol (Schmitz, 1992). Separation can be a strategy to find positive identity in a cultural environment where one's social group is discriminated or undervalued by isolating from the negative representations in the dominant group.

- **Integration** happens when individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture, while also maintaining their culture of origin. Integration leads to and is often synonymous with biculturalism. In this case, one maintains some degree of cultural integrity, while also participating in a larger social network. One holds on to some aspects of their own culture such as central norms and values but also engages with the new cultural environment. Research shows (e.g., Berry, 1997, 2005) that those who employ the integration strategy (by engaging in and becoming competent in the two cultures) usually adapt better than those who are primarily oriented to one culture (by using either the assimilation or separation strategies), and much better than those who engage in neither culture (the marginalisation strategy).

### **How are acculturation strategies connected to workshops about communication?**

The **Communication Accommodation Theory** (CAT) proposed by Giles helps to identify the impact of acculturation strategies in the way people acquire and use a language. Accommodation refers to the “constant movement toward and away from the others” (Giles, Ogay 2007:295). Convergence is used to become more similar to the other, mark agreement and connection to the other. Convergence is in line with the motivation of being accepted and appreciated by others. Its risk is a loss in the sense of social identity, continuity or distinction. Convergence represents a movement similar to “assimilation”. To the contrary, divergence accentuates the differences between interlocutors, marking disagreement, a need to separate, marking one’s distinctiveness, asserting oneself. It could be connected to the strategy of separation.

It is important to note that “convergence” is not a superior strategy to “divergence”, both have their place in relating to others in dynamic ways. In fact it is precisely an optimal level of convergence and divergence that people usually seek, representing a strategy of integration, of connecting and validating the he cultural baggage brought and the baggage acquired in a harmonic or creative way. Our example of (6) of the suburban youngsters exemplifies such a strategy, even if for the superficial observer it could be a simple failure of language acquisition.

Finally and more generally, being aware of the different acculturation strategies and their impact on people’s wellbeing helps the trainer create a programme that will work towards “integration” in its best: offering a space of recognition for the original identities and inviting a positive connection with the new cultural environment.