

The ABC's of Inter-Cultural Communication

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Abstract

Communication is the transmission of information from one person to another with a limited degree of success. And when humans connect successfully over cultural barriers, there are always hidden interests that must be negotiated. Psychologically, all people are born alike, but they become different through enculturation. This process led to the current diversity of national cultures. Cultures are like pyramids with the physical environment at the base, with steps for Behavior, Values and Beliefs in the middle, and with World Views given to us by Science, Religion and Philosophy, at the top. The closer we are to earth, the easier we communicate. The higher we get toward the top, the more difficult to do so. This paper explains why we are different and tries to bridge the gap of communication between different cultures.

Keywords

communication, culture, value, belief, personality

Communication is the transmission of information (facts, emotions, ideas, concepts...) from one person to another person with a limited degree of success. In its essence it means connecting one brain with other brains. But, allegorically speaking, the biggest distance in the universe, as well as the shortest, is between two brains. Furthermore, when humans connect successfully over various cultural barriers, there are always hidden *interests* that come into play in the business of *negotiations*.

Psychologically, all people are born alike, but they become *humans* through the process of *enculturation*. Without culture people only have instincts that may help them survive within the natural environment. What make us unique are our *brain capacity*, our *cultures*, and our *consciousness*. *Culture* is defined here anthropologically, as everything man-made.

That means materials goods for our physical needs as well as spiritual things for the mind. As for the brain, it develops gradually and if young humans do not acquire certain knowledge and abilities at the right age, such as speech for example, the future adults will never be able to make up for it. As for consciousness, acquiring it is a life-time endeavor and it is still not a fully understood process. In this vein, if the brain can be compared to a complex computer that reacts to our senses, consciousness reacts to a world of ideas. This is

why it is so important to know the *enculturation* factors, material and spiritual, that makes us what we are. (1)

The process of *enculturation* implies the immediate family, the natural environment, the school, the society at large, the nation, and eventually the entire world. In the growing and developing process, children evolve and become gradually members of a family, of a local group, then members of a nation, and eventually citizens of the world. However, if children start by being alike everywhere, adults represent first and foremost the native culture that has molded them. With regard to individual formation, while growing and learning, every child goes through several stages: *Imprinting, Modeling, Rebellion, and Adulthood* which brings about *Acceptance and Social Integration*. As a general rule, by the age of about 20 people are already shaped culturally and are integrated into their native societies. After that age only significant events, such as wars, great catastrophes, social revolutions or tragic accidents, can reshape or change a person. (2)

In today's world, our culture is also shaped increasingly by modern technologies, such as TVs, telephones, the internet, audio-visual materials, etc. In a way, the world has become a *global village* and some of us have become *global citizens*. However, it has been estimated that only about one percent of the world's population has the knowledge and the means to qualify as global citizens. But, have we acquired *global consciousness*? The answer is No! As of this time in history, people continue to identify chiefly with their *national cultures and interests* which are very much specific to individual countries.

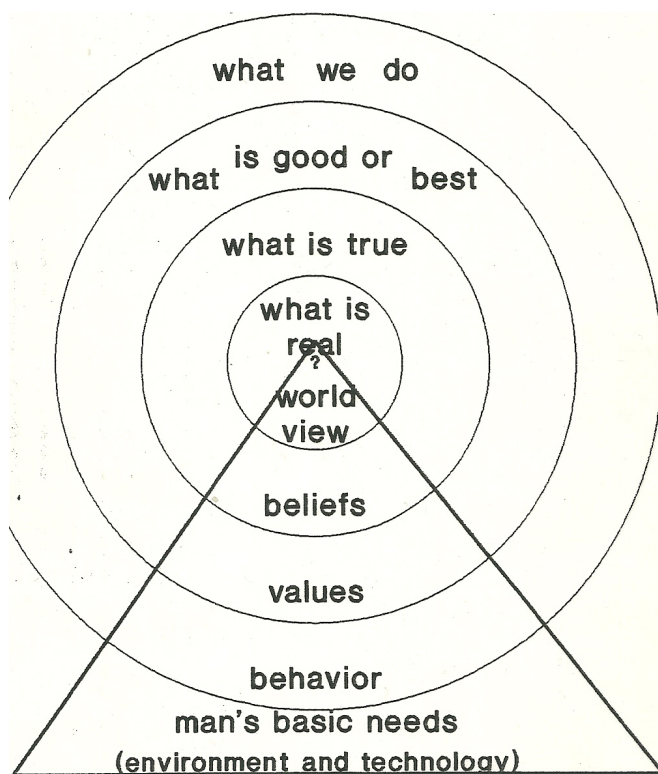
Once people are integrated in their native cultures and societies, they develop several layers of personality to better interact socially. There is an *inner and an outer personality*, a *role-playing one* and a *ceremonial personality*. Each layer requires a certain behavior which is to a large degree specific to every culture. The *inner personality* reflects our intimate attitudes toward the immediate family and toward those we love. It is pretty much universal. A mother is a mother everywhere! The *outer personality* reflects the attitude and behavior toward other people in a public social context. It very much depends on each culture. A *role-playing personality* reflects the behavior in a controlled social context, such as a school, for example. And a *ceremonial personality* refers to specific behavior for special occasions such as religious rituals or official ceremonies. We are all conditioned to accept these roles even without realizing it. (3)

When interacting with members of different cultures, it is highly recommended to observe and respect the local etiquette. If we do not know it, we should be more reserved to avoid taboos or social gaffes. Nevertheless, expect to

make mistakes! It is inevitable, but knowing the ABC's of interacting culturally can help considerably. In this case, *knowing a little can help a lot!*

Inter-Cultural Communication is a relatively new inter-disciplinary field of study. Throughout a long career I came across many sources that helped me formulate my own model of understanding. Individual cultures are like *layered pyramids*. (See Figure) We may share the same base, which at a global level is the physical earth itself, but the apexes of the pyramids are in the recesses of our minds or somewhere in heaven, worlds apart from each other. In an allegorical way, we live with our feet strongly planted on the ground, but with our minds up in the skies! We may easily agree while counting beans and negotiating, and yet disagree completely in the world of abstract ideas!

This paper addresses the process of cultural formation chiefly as *national cultures* and it tries to answer three basic questions: *Why we are different? What is the Culture Pyramid? And what should we do to better understand each other and to communicate more successfully?*



The Culture Pyramid

To understand humans we should visualize culture as a *Layered Pyramid*. (4) At its base is our interaction with the physical environment around us. It could be an arctic or a tropical environment, mountain sides or sea coasts, a rural village or an urban industrial site. In each one of these cases we need a certain *Behavior* to *Do what is needed to Make a Living*. Thus, from the very beginning and depending on the environment, humans have developed in different directions. Yet, this is the level where we have most in common with each other. Inter-cultural communication at this level is the easiest. When people of different cultures come together, what they notice first is their behavior and the language they speak. Behavior and languages are in fact the most visible parts of any culture. When we raise children, we try to guide them toward a desirable behavior. When we teach school, we try to shape the behavior of the students. When we get in touch at any age, we try to adjust and influence behavior. However, *behavior* is just the most visible layer of culture. In a way, behavior can be compared to the visible part of an iceberg. What we see is only ten percent of the iceberg and it is indeed very important, but what we do not see is the invisible part of culture that determines our behavior. And to further complicate the issue, even at behavioral level, what is *normal or desirable* in a given society, may be *abnormal or undesirable* in another one. It is all relative!

Furthermore, behavior is strongly influenced by *perceptions* which are received through our five senses. Theoretically, human senses should be rather similar at birth, but if this is the case, why does the world seem so different from culture to culture and even from person to person? Perception is described as the variance between what a person believes to be *real* and what is *actually real*. But, what is real?

From a perception point of view, something funny happened to me when I was a professor in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. At the time, I was lodged in a small house next to a garden where the owner had a number of chickens. Everyday a rooster would wake me up early in the morning with its well-known crow. One day I explained to a colleague of mine that I was coming early because the rooster woke me up with his *Cucurigu*! He began to laugh because in his native language the rooster sang differently. Then, I remembered that in French *Cucurigu* is *Kikirikiki*, in Spanish is *Cucurucucu*, in Italian is *Cocoricoco* and in English is *Cock-a-doodle-doo*! Gee! The rooster knows so many languages! Or, is it just us, humans of different cultures that perceive its crow differently? Actually, most of our perceptions are the result of *enculturation*.

Geography, expressed as various environments, has spread us apart in the past and has made us culturally very different. History, or the passing of time, is now bringing us together, but we still have a long way to go. I often use the

example of bringing together one person from a hot equatorial forest with another one from an icy arctic place. Theoretically, I put them together in the year 1900. What would they have in common? How will they relate to each other and what will they communicate? Remember, an Inuit from Greenland has a dozen words for snow and there is no such word in Amazonia. Yet, what a difference one hundred years has made! Jump to the year 2000 and put together an auto mechanic from Romania and another one from Japan. They will have a lot in common with each other and communication between them would be as easy as ABC.

Let's now jump to the top of the culture pyramid in the invisible world of thoughts, ideas and concepts. What are the Indian concepts of *Maia* and *Karma*? What does *Immaculate Conception*, *Second Coming* or *Resurrection* mean to non-Christians? Such concepts must be explained and yet, they are very important because they give direction and spiritual sense to our lives. It is the apex of the pyramid that gives us our *views* and our *understanding of the world*. At this level, cultures try to answer the questions: *What is the meaning and the purpose of life? What is real in this world?* And this level of *world-views* is linked to our *Beliefs and Values* and it influences our daily *Behavior*. (5)

Every culture, big or small, must have a *World-view* and a *System of Beliefs*. Throughout history, *World Views* and the *Belief System* have been handed down to us first by *Religion and Philosophy* and more and more recently by *Science*. Science dominates in today's world, but Philosophy remains important and Religion still prevails in many societies. This high level of mental pursuits is open to those great scientists, religious leaders and philosophers who can climb the pyramid and expand our knowledge. By doing so, they find new layers of realities and truth and they enrich us all. Encouragingly, the possibility of climbing the pyramid of knowledge is open to all of us. We only have to engage on the road of discoveries and enlightenment. Though, the pursuit is not easy!

Take science, for example. Such personalities, as Copernicus, Newton, and Einstein, have changed the world with their new ideas and discoveries. However, science adds continuously new layers of knowledge, and with every new layer it redefines our understanding of the world. What was true yesterday is no longer true today and the *concept of truth* may change again tomorrow. Remember that once *the sun revolved around the earth!*? Then, what is really true in this world and how we define the very idea of *Scientific Truth*? For example, what was the Big Bang and who or what triggered it? What is a multi-verse? Is there an *Ultimate Truth*? We do not know and this is why skeptics find major problems with both science and religion. People believe now that atoms and subatomic particles do exist, but has anyone seen an atom? No, because atoms are not visible, but we accept their existence because we trust our scientists. On the other hand, has anyone seen God? No, but people believe in His existence because of *Faith*!

Between the visible layer of behavior and the invisible spiritual layer there are two other very important layers that link the subjective world of ideas with the objective world surrounding us. They are *Values* and *Beliefs*. They connect *what we do as practical Behavior* with the *World View* as an *intellectual construct*. *Values* respond to *what is good or bad*, or *what is normal and abnormal* in any society at any given time. They do change, but very slowly. Values influence people's daily attitudes and behavior and are influenced by the belief systems. As for *Beliefs*, they answer to the question *what is true*, or *what we hold to be true*, and are influenced by our world views. Yet, we still have to define what *True* is. What we know for sure is that everything is changing in the world, including ourselves. Are we advancing toward a universal culture? The answer should be yes, but we do so very, very slowly. And one more thing! While *Values* are adopted by social consensus and are given to us by society, *Beliefs* are accepted collectively or personally by *Faith*. Yet, beliefs are hard to prove, are a lot more stable, and are very difficult to challenge. (6)

It should also be stressed that *Behavior, Values and Beliefs* are interrelated and overlapping. For example: Attending a religious service is an act of Behavior. Respecting the church and any temple is a social Value. Believing religious precepts is an act of Faith. Separating them is not easy and understanding them requires openness and patience. However, we do adapt and change our behavior. We even change or at least adjust our values. But, changing beliefs or negotiating religious principles is practically impossible. Thus, when interacting cross-culturally, we should not challenge other people's tenets!

Returning to the top of the pyramid, we see that while Science is bringing us together, Religion is still keeping us apart. This is probably why the current advocates of *globalization* are trying to replace religion with the concept of *Human Rights*. But, between the two there is a huge difference. Religion is like a cross with two intersecting arms. The vertical or spiritual arm is linking us to what many people think to be a divine force. And they relate to the Divine through the Belief System. The horizontal or ethical arm of the cross is linking people socially to each other and together to the environment. That implies Behavior and Values. Yet, the concept of human rights is only governing social relations in a world which otherwise seems to be God-less and devoid of any spiritual purpose. This may explain the lack of values and the aberrant behavior that prevails in today's world.

There are many pyramids of culture in the world, but the most typical is the national one. Within the world cultures each nation develops a national character which embodies its essential characteristics. Then, the closer two nations are, the closer their characters and the easier to communicate. The further they are, the more different they become and the more difficult to understand each other.

However, each person is also an individual pyramid of knowledge and understanding. Thus, when interacting with others we should see each one of us as a unique person and we should try to link at a personal level. Learning the name of the person you interact with, and pronouncing it clearly and correctly, is the first step toward good communication.

When people get together, most of the time they try to interact. The closer they are to the base of the pyramid of culture the easier to communicate. The higher up the pyramid, the more difficult to understand and agree. On the practical side, it is essential to know the situations that bring together people of different cultures. Most common are: tourism, studying abroad, refugees and immigration, work on contracts, diplomatic representation and others. In any of these situations one should remember the *Purpose* and the *Reason* that make us interact. It is one thing to visit a country as a tourist and a completely different story if one is assigned to perform a job abroad.

It is also worth knowing that when speaking, only some 30 percent of what we communicate is relayed orally, while 35 percent is relayed by paralanguage and another 35 percent by body language. (7) It should also be stressed that numbers and nouns are the easiest to communicate while adjectives are more difficult because they carry subjective values. Either way in a different cultural setting one may encounter what appears to be a *strange world*. And one may even suffer an unexpected syndrome that has been defined as *Culture Shock*. With patience and with some moral support, most people manage to overcome it. This is the price we pay for moving away from our native cultures in the era of globalization! Last, but not least, we all have various *interests such as personal, business or national interests, and we all try to pursue them*. *Interests* distort the *ideal* model of communication and trigger the delicate process of *negotiations*. This is a particular case of communication.

Explanatory Note: Most of this article is based on Dr. Nicholas Dima's book *Cross Cultural Communication* (Washington, DC: The Institute for the Study of Man, 1990) as well on his course with the same name given periodically at the Romanian-American University of Bucharest and on his personal experience.

Footnotes

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