Part One (One Page) Please put the reference after each question

1. Investigate local organizations and make a list of three different organizations or efforts in the local community that could use some sort of civic or political involvement. Explain your selection and describe in what ways you believe the organizations should be involved. (150 words)

I am from the state of Georgia you any organizations in this area. Please include references

1. Compare the strengths and advantages of “framework” approaches to “emic” understandings of a culture. (50 words)
2. Describe a culture to which you belong in terms of the various characteristics of culture described in this chapter. Be sure to clearly apply at least five characteristics. (75 words)

Here are a few details that can help:

I am biracial Father black/mother white but I mostly identify with the Black culture

I am religious faith Christianity

Political View Democratic Party

Chapter 3 Origins: Where does our “culture” come from?

Intercultural Communication for Everyday Life, First Edition. John R. Baldwin, Robin R. Means Coleman, Alberto González, and Suchitra Shenoy-Packer.

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Chapter objectives

After this chapter, you should be able to:

 Compare two different models for how to understand communication and meaning

 Explain some of the debates concerning the definition of communication

 Describe different views of the relationship between culture and communication

 Provide three competing views of how one could define culture

 List some of the elements that might influence an interaction with someone from another culture or group, applying the model of communication provided in this chapter

The relationship between communication and culture: How do they inform each other?

Defining culture: How can we define culture—and what are the implications of our definition?

Aspects and elements of culture: What is culture like?

A model of interaction: How can we best understand intercultural and intergroup communication?

People from one culture or nation sometimes call another group “uncultured.” Professors and concerned citizens raise concerns about a “culture war.” Organizations give training in “cultural sensitivity”. Travelers abroad might suffer “culture shock”, and some people say there is a “culture clash” between the younger and older generations (Figure 3.1). We see the word “culture” used in many different and sometimes contradictory ways by people in their everyday lives and by researchers from different fields.

These uses of the term culture highlight several issues that are central to our study of culture and communication. First, we must consider what culture even means. In the 19th century, authors like Matthew Arnold (1882/1971, p. 36) defined culture as “a study in perfection”, leading to a clear distinction between high culture, referring to activities and expressions that represented what people believed to be moral and intellectual refinement (opera, theater, museums), as opposed to low, or popular culture, which included the everyday activities and expressions of people. But few scholars today hold such a definition. Another issue is whether, just by belonging to a particular racial, age, sex, national or other group, one can be said to have the “culture” of that group. Even if nations should not be considered as cultures, as we stated in chapter 1, people debate how large or small a group can be considered a culture—from a couple to an organization to a region of the world.

This chapter introduces possible ways to define culture, some of the building blocks and aspects of culture, and, finally, a model to help us understand intercultural or intergroup communication. But in order even to get to this point, we should first pause to consider the nature of communication itself.

The relationship between communication and culture: How do they inform each other?

Edward T. Hall (1959, p. 191) said, “Culture is communication, and communication is culture.” That is not to say the two are equal, but rather that there is a close connection between communication and culture. If you are studying intercultural communication as part of a degree in some area of communication, you may already have encountered some sort of definition of communication, such as that communication is the transfer of meaning between a sender and a receiver. However, there is much debate as to whether something is or is not communication.

Defining communication

Katherine Miller (2005) summarizes the debate surrounding the notion of communication. She says most scholars agree that we should refer to communication as a process, rather than simply as a single message. We can think of a message as a set of symbols—words, sounds, or images—placed together to represent some meaning. While a message might transfer an idea from one person to another, that transfer exists in an ongoing set of messages and ongoing relationships. The concept of process refers not just to the message itself, but how it is intended, sent, received, and interpreted. For example, one standard model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1964) describes communication as a message produced intentionally by a source and encoded by a transmitter; this made sense as one of the originators of the model was in telecommunications and imagined signals going through wires. The encoded message, now a signal, traveled through a channel and was decoded by a receiver, so that a message would arrive at a destination. Noise can interfere with the passing of the message through the channel (see Figure 3.2)

Figure 3.2 Shannon and Weaver’s model of communication is commonly used to explain the communication process.

Source: © Shannon, C., & Weaver, W. 1949/1964. The Mathematical Theory of Communication. Reproduced with permission of the University of Illinois Press.

Such a model applies, for example, to a video-chat discussion between Christelle, a French student, and Guillermo, a friend she has made in Argentina. The Argentinian does not really hear her voice, but sound waves coming through cyberspace, and “noise” can be interference in the transmission, a poor Internet connection, or laughter in the Internet café where she is typing. In face-to-face communication, Christelle’s voice and gestures become the transmitter, as she translates her ideas into a message. The channel is airwaves and the receiver, her friends’ ears and eyes. In modern application, noise can be physical, such as whether the room is too cold, or it can be psychological. In this case, cultural and language differences are a type of noise. If Christelle wants her message to be better understood, she could do things to overcome “noise,” such as giving the message at a different time, building some (but not too much) repetition into her message, or using more than one channel, like verbal and visual symbols.

Some suggest that this model is too linear and that, especially in face-to-face communication, both parties send and receive messages at the same time. The idea of feedback in the model addresses this criticism to some degree. That is, the receiver later, or even at the same time, gives some verbal or nonverbal response to the sender. Here, we find a second area of agreement, that communication is transactional. Communication involves give and take between two or more people, not just of message exchange, but of mutual influence: communicators influence each other, even if they are not aware of the influences. A third area of agreement is that communication is symbolic—communicators use words (verbal or printed); images such as photographs or emoticons; sounds such as sighs, grunts or laughter; and nonverbal behaviors such as a wave of the hand or a wink, to represent something else.

The fact that communication is symbolic is important for the study of culture, as it deals with the meaning of words. The symbolic nature of communication shows us that breakdowns in communication are based not only on psychological or physical noise, but also on meaning. The Ogden-Richards Triangle of Meaning (Ogden & Richards, 1923/1969) (Figure 3.3) suggests that we connect the words of people in our environment with the reality we experience. For example, we see a little furry animal, and someone says “guinea pig.” This links the reality, the actual object in our environment, with a symbol, a sound or visual representation of the reality. Later, when someone uses the word or image, we sort through the references, or thought images in our mind, for the one that links to the symbol we originally heard in regard to that object or action. This is important in cultural communication. First, we realize that the same symbol—“guinea pig”—can be associated with different cultural realities. In each culture, if someone uses the symbol, it links directly to the thought, and if someone sees the object, it links to the thought. But the link between the symbol and what it represents is not exact. A symbol means something different to each person, as no two people have the same experience with an object or with the symbol. One reader might think of a “guinea pig” as a furry pet she had as a child, but a reader in a different culture might think of an animal used in healing rituals or as a tasty snack. We see the cultural power of symbols in globalization: Starbucks, a coffee shop corporation with outlets around the world, has decided to drop the word “Starbucks” from the logo, similar to the wordless Nike “swoosh.” The idea is that the image itself will link in consumers’ minds, not only to coffee, but to a whole set of ideas associated with the identity of the Starbucks shops.

At the same time, scholars in the field of communication disagree on some points, such as whether or not one can communicate with oneself. As you wonder what you should wear, are you “communicating?” Some say call this “cognition,” or thought, and consider it the realm of psychology research. Others call it intrapersonal communication, when one creates messages for oneself, within the mind. Another debate is whether communication must be intentional. Paul Watzlawick and his colleagues (1967, p. 51) suggested that “one cannot not communicate.” As long as we are in the presence of others, if we do something, like dozing off in class, and someone else attributes meaning to the behavior, it is communication. Some people consider unintentional “symptomatic” nonverbal behaviors like yawns to be communication, stating that as long as another person gives meaning to the behavior, it is communicative (Andersen, 1991). Others argue that giving meaning to another’s behavior is a psychological process, and say communication only occurs if someone intentionally sends a message and it is received (Motley, 1990).

What do you think? When people from different cultures work together, there are often different time expectations. One person might want to follow “clock time;” another might want to work out an argument until it is completed, even if it means running late for another appointment. To what degree do you think organizations should make clear expectations for things like time orientations, on which multicultural employees differ?

This debate is important in the study of intercultural communication, as in nonverbal communication. While we may want to study how people from different cultural groups create messages intentionally, it is also important to consider the unintentional effects of our messages. For that reason, the authors of this book consider communication to be the process of behaving and interpreting behavior (verbal, nonverbal, mediated) between people.

The relationship between communication and culture

The notion that communication is transactional, which includes the idea that communicators affect each other, lead us to a final consideration regarding communication, and that is its relationship to culture. One possible relationship is that culture is a variable that influences communication. In this view, “culture” or some aspect of identity (such as biological sex, age, or ethnicity) characterizes a group. If this is true, then we will make predictions about people based on culture. For example, Austria values equality and minimizes status (Hofstede, 2009), whereas people in Singapore see status differences as important for society (see chapter 4). In the same respect, many writers have done studies on how men or women, Blacks or Whites in the United States, or older and younger people might differ in terms of communication, treating sex, race, or age as a variable. A different view of culture states that people of a particular culture or identity group create values, beliefs, and norms of behavior through communication. This constitutive approach says that we socially create meanings and culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966): Mahatma Gandhi and those who struggled with him reconstructed not only the politics but the self-definition of India. Sandra Metts (2004) suggests that communication both represents and constitutes reality. That is, we can use communication to describe things, much like the semantic triangle in Figure 3.3. But at the same time, cultures are in a constant process of change, some deliberate and some accidental, through the transactional communication of their members.

It might be that a view that culture and communication change each other through time is too simple. So there is a third approach—that the social construction of culture is an active process in which groups, with more or less awareness, struggle with one another. Culture change or stability is not simply a process of communication, but of intergroup striving—sometimes deliberate and sometimes not—through communication, law, policy, and other efforts, to make a particular cultural view dominant. In sum, the three views of relationship between communication and culture—culture as variable predicting communication; culture as created through ongoing communication; and culture and its creation serving certain power interests—correspond to the scientific, humanistic, and critical views of research (see chapter 2).

Defining culture: How can we define culture—and what are the implications of our definition?

The competing views of the relationship between culture and communication suggest that any single definition of culture will probably represent only certain research and theoretical perspectives. Researchers at different times have analyzed the variety of definitions of culture (Baldwin et al., 2006; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). In contrast to the early definition of culture as moral or intellectual evidence, noted at the beginning of this chapter, today we often treat culture as a group of people. We might talk about the Inuit culture of Canada and the United States, or the Ainu of Hokkaido, Japan, thinking not of beliefs or values, but of “the people who share culture” (Winkelman, 1993, p. 86). Others treat culture as a set of things that exist in a system, pattern, or structure, related to each other. This might be a system of meanings—values, norms, and beliefs (e.g., Keesing, 1981) or a whole “way of life” (Williams, 1981, p. 43). Others place meanings, behaviors, artifacts, and social systems all within the system of what they call culture. Culture for these writers is:

 The deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. (Samovar & Porter, 2003, p. 8)

Often, these writers not only focus on the structure of culture, but also on what it does; that is, on its function. It solves some problem for people or helps a group adjust to the stimuli in its environment. We might call these last approaches to culture the “suitcase” model of culture, as it treats culture like something that a family, organization, or other group has and passes on to others.

Some recent writers treat culture with the constitutive view described above, seeing cultures as “variable, open, and dynamic systems, and not as uniform, total, or totalizing entities” (Markus et al., 1996, p. 863). Culture is like a “verb” (Street, 1993)—active and always changing. It both changes and is changed by the messages we create (Figure 3.4). And still others describe culture as a “contested zone in which different groups struggle to define issues in their own interests,” with different groups having unequal access to the resources to get their message out to public forums (Moon, 2002, p. 16). In any culture there is a way of thinking or acting held by most people, but there are also other groups who hold and promote different ways of thinking or acting. Finally, other writers take a more post-modern view, not looking for what makes a group homogenous; instead they analyze how different sets of ideas compete for attention, such as how different groups in U.S. American society vie to define the meaning of “family” or how there are different ideologies of what it means to be “Black” in the United States.

What do you think? Think about the culture of your own group (from organization to nation—you decide!), especially if there is some conflict going on in the culture (e.g., new views of how the organization should operate; struggles around new views of the role of men and women in a religious organization). What are some of the dominant cultural premises, ways of action, or meanings? What are some that are “residual” or emerging? In changing cultures, which type or types of definition do you find most helpful and why?

It is important how we think and talk about culture or other identities such as sex/gender, race sexual orientation, or age. Much traditional intercultural research has treated and sometimes still treats cultures, sexes, or racial groups as “variables” and tries to describe or predict differences between these groups. This research is useful, as it does provide some general guidelines for us as we travel across national boundaries; but it hides the fact that even within the city of Athens, Greece, for example, we should expect to find several or many different cultures. Definitions that focus on the dynamic nature of culture are helpful for they slow down our tendency to think of cultures as unchanging. We often read books or see movies that describe a particular culture, but people from that culture might tell us that it really doesn’t represent what their culture is like today. Church cultures, organizational cultures, and neighborhood cultures are always changing. More critical perspectives help us to understand that forces actively seek to change culture, sometimes through things such as political lobbying, or grassroots campaigns for social change, as we see in the growing environmental focus in many nations. But as we know, other forces give different understandings of things such as global climate change, and environmental issues frequently get mired down in political debates. In a similar way, if we look at growing individualism in Western (and other) cultures, we see that advertisers seek to promote and define that individualism in such a way that we define ourselves by purchasing consumer goods. Cultural notions of beauty support a multi-billion dollar cosmetic industry, and so on.

Each view of culture has its merits. We do believe that there are regularities, as shown through research, that, on the average, Russians will likely treat humor differently than Australian Aboriginals. Thus, social scientific research to understand cultures has an important place, especially as we develop organizational, local, and national policy. But we need a view of culture that both sees culture beyond national boundaries and admits its shifting nature. The politics of cultural change are important to admit, and people who hold the more political definitions of culture usually do not accept the traditional notions of culture. With a critical view of culture, for example, we see how different groups try to influence the assumptions about what education should be in our universities or national cultures. But we should not think that all such efforts are deliberate. Sometimes we tell jokes, make videos, or use communication patterns that simply pass on ways of thinking. Not all of these will be about one group or idea dominating another.

In the end, it is hard to find a definition of culture that covers all perspectives. We define culture in this book as the way of life of a group of people, including symbols, values, behaviors, artifacts, and other shared aspects, that continually evolves as people share messages and is often the result of struggle between different groups who share different perspectives, interests, and power relationships.

Aspects and elements of culture: What is culture like?

Cultures, whether we think of them as a system of elements or as a process of struggle between groups, are made up of certain components and act in certain ways. If someone asked us simply to “describe our culture,” we might have difficulty, as culture seems formless and hard to get a hold of. It would be like trying to carry all of our books, pens, and papers to school, but without having a bag of some sort to carry them in! However, a list of aspects of culture gives us a way to organize our thoughts about culture. In this section, we describe elements of culture and then describe what it is like. The elements constitute or make up a culture—its parts, and the characteristics are how it operates, much like the wheels, frame, and cables are parts of a bicycle, but the way they work together to take us from one place to another describe how the bicycle functions.

Aspects of culture

Culture consists of a variety of concepts, behaviors, artifacts, and systems. The concepts include things like values (ideals or priorities a culture holds to be important), beliefs (ideas about the nature of things, with world view pertaining to beliefs specifically about humans and their role or place in the cosmos), and rules, norms, and mores (expectations for how one should act in certain situations, with the norms pertaining to whether those expectations have beliefs about the morality of an action and mores being strong enough to bring some social sanction if one does not follow them) (see chapter 4). In Brazil, family and time with friends are especially important, and it is important to show hospitality to them (values); and people speak of the future in a way that suggests a belief in God that may permeate everyday thinking more than in many Western cultures (world view).

The rules, norms, and mores are the mental patterns for behavior, with actual behaviors following these to a greater or lesser degree. Behaviors may be work-related (functional), have no apparent symbolic meaning (such as taking the bus in the big city, simply because it is the only transportation one might have available), or have symbolic meaning. A complicated class of behaviors and meanings is the communication system of a culture—the set of signs and symbols one uses to transfer ideas, emotions, or impressions to others. These include verbal behaviors, such as the carrying on of conversation; nonverbal behaviors, including everything from how close one stands to whether one has tattoos and facial piercings; paraverbal behaviors, which include sounds (laughter, sighs), and sounds of speech that are not words themselves (rate of speech, accent/pronunciation, pauses, intonation); and mediated messages, including those created through art, mass media, or other mediated forms. (We talk about messages in chapters 7–10). Language brings together elements of both thought and behavior. Concepts, behavior, and artifacts usually work together, such as the example of money. Money is an artifact with meaning, but we also have cultural ideas about how it should be used, which lead to different spending and saving behaviors in different cultures.

In the Brazilian example, there are many functional behaviors that are just the carrying on of life. In the Amazon city of Manaus, most people take two or three showers a day. However, actions reflect cultural concepts, such as values. It is also polite to offer guests a brief shower before visiting or eating. When eating at someone’s house, the host may put a lot of food on the guest’s plate, with the idea that it should be more than enough. The guest should show that it is more than enough by leaving some on the plate (behavior reflecting hospitality and connection). People use the jeito brasileiro—the “Brazilian Way”—building interpersonal connections to cut through the bureaucracy of systems. And, to reflect a view of the divine in everyday life, many people still say, “se Deus quiser” (God willing), when talking about plans for the future.

All of these aspects fit within various social systems of culture. Sociologists and anthropologists describe a variety of such systems—economic, educational, family, legal, political, leisure, and so on. To these, we add media systems. These systems provide a context within which cultural and intercultural communication occurs. Context is also a major influence on communication. For example, William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim (2003) consider the physical setting (are we communicating in a tavern or in an office?), the climate, the potential of the context for interaction (are we at a movie or in a meeting?), and even the furnishings, as these impact the communication event. However, if we look at communication between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Palestinian and Jewish residents of Israel, or Blacks and Whites in the United States, we must consider historical tensions as well as social, political, and economic contexts. Both views of context—environmental and social—are important, because relational, historical, and economical contexts, including contexts of warmth or hostility, advantage or disadvantage, influence our communication.

Characteristics of culture

Several authors have outlined some of the ways culture functions and some of the main characteristics of culture (e.g., Brislin, 2006; Samovar & Porter, 2004). These authors make important points about what culture is like that can guide our thinking as we look later at specific aspects of culture. We will summarize these, with some points of our own.

ON THE NET

Larry Samovar and Richard Porter (2004) suggest that one of the ways we learn our culture as we grow up is through proverbs. Here are a few examples:

• “Be not afraid of growing slowly. Be afraid only of standing still.” – Chinese proverb

• “If you wish good advice, ask an old man” – Romanian proverb

• “This world is a harsh place, this world” – Zulu proverb

Find several proverbs from a particular culture (e.g., Romania, Italy) on the Internet. What can you find out about the culture from its proverbs?

Culture is learned and transmitted

As we noted earlier, culture is learned and passed on, either through the generations, or, in younger organizational cultures, through the years. People who study culture note how we learn culture—it is not something that we are born with. We might mistakenly think that because someone is from such-and-such culture, she is naturally aggressive, or she should be able to hold her alcohol. Even if there is a genetic component to many such traits, actual behaviors are learned culturally. Samovar and Porter (2004) note how we learn culture through things such as cultural sayings or proverbs (see “On the Net,” earlier), art, and mass media. We also learn culture from our family, friends, schools, churches, and other social institutions. The process of learning one’s own culture is enculturation, with this referring to the people or processes that teach one the culture. If someone travels to another culture, that person goes through acculturation, the process of learning another culture, and deculturation, the unlearning of one’s own culture. But we also learn culture through other means, as we will see below under culture change.

Culture is closely related to symbolic behavior (communication)

As we noted before, culture is intricately tied to communication. First, communication is the primary means one learns culture. One might also learn through observation. But if culture is the human-made part of our environment (Brislin, 2000), then we would not have any culture if people did not communicate to create it. Thus, culture is created (and changed) through communication.

Cultures change… and stay the same

Samovar and Porter (2004) note that all cultures are dynamic; that is, they are always changing. They outline three means of change: invention or innovation, where someone within a culture derives or creates a new artifact (like a cell phone), a new behavioral practice (like text-messaging someone), or a new idea (like communism), which, in turn, changes that culture. Cultures also change through diffusion, or the spread of artifacts, behaviors, and ideas across a group or culture or between groups or cultures. Thus, as communism spreads from its early roots (Marx) in Germany to Russia, China, Cuba, and other countries, it is “diffusing.” In the same way, environmentalism, feminism, and ideas of civic engagement, have spread from culture to culture. Scholars study the spread of the cell phone through Amazonian or desert cultures, and study ways to get a culture with a high HIV + population, as a culture, to adopt safer sex. Finally, cultures can change through acculturation. Different from our first use of the word, which refers to individuals adapting their behaviors to a new culture, in this sense, acculturation refers to extensive contact between two groups, for example, that share the same space (for example, Black, White, Korean, and Latino cultures in a Los Angeles, USA, neighborhood). Hybridity is a notion that describes cultural blending between two cultures in contact. This can be in the form of a language that combines elements of two languages (see chapter 7), new art or music styles (K-pop, or Korean-pop music), or behaviors (using traditional medicine while one also sees a doctor) (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Postcolonial writers such as Jolanta Drzewiecka and Rona Halualani (2002) argue that in hybridity, elements are not blended evenly, but through power struggles and inequalities between groups. Some authors study the struggles within cultures between the tensions of change and stability, with different cultures (nations, organizations, churches, etc.) valuing change or stability to different degrees, and even different individuals within those groups having competing needs for change and stability (Martin et al., 2002).

What do you think? Consider a major city near you. Many cities have groups that have moved in large numbers from a single homeland to a variety of locations (a diaspora). There might be a blend of cultural practices, values, or world views as the two groups live side by side (hybridity). Consider the particular blend of peoples (e.g., Filipinos in Hong Kong; Indians in Caribbean nations; Chinese in Singapore). Describe the elements of each culture that are adopted or considered valid by the other culture. Is the cultural trade balanced? What factors do you think might influence whether either group adopts cultural traits of the other? In these cases, is a “melting pot” possible or beneficial? Why or why not?

Culture exists at different, interlocking levels We can also think of culture as existing at different levels. Young Yun Kim (1984) outlines several such levels (Figure 3.5). At the largest level are macroregional regions, large areas of the world that share cultural similarities, such as Southeast Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. At the next level, we find regional or national cultures, such as the Australian Outback, or Chinese culture. Many authors in intercultural communication have studied differences between different national groups. Increasingly, however, researchers are thinking in terms of co-cultural groups as cultures as well. These are groups that share a space together, sharing some aspects of a dominant culture, and mixing or blending their cultures to a greater or lesser degree. Smaller cultural groups are organizational cultures, where even the company one works for, like Caterpillar or the Catholic Church, might have its own corporate values (influenced from location to location by regional/national cultures). Kim’s smallest level of culture is “individual” culture; but since we believe culture is something that must be shared at some level, we do not see this as a culture. We do believe that there can be family or relational cultures. Carley Dodd and John Baldwin (2002), borrowing from Julia Wood’s (1996) idea of relational cultures, suggest that, at a “microcultural” level, even families can have their own expectations, norms, and so on.

Figure 3.5 Levels of Culture. Young Yun Kim describes several levels at which culture might exist. We have modified her figure to include family cultures, but deleted individual culture, as we feel culture is shared.

Source: Kim, 1984, p. 18. Reproduced with permission.

Certainly, these levels inform each other, and some may impact communication. Often co-cultural differences may be greater than national differences. Similar groups, such as farmers in China and in the Pantanal of South America might have more in common which each other than either group has with big-city dwellers in those two regions. The larger group we get, the more cautious we should be with claims. For example, China contains many cultural regions, which, while largely similar, will also pose some differences, and the “Middle East” consists of at least 18 distinct nations, each with various “cultures” within it, and characterized by a variety of languages, religions, and ethnic backgrounds.

Culture is mostly invisible to its members

Brislin (2000) notes that most cultural members might have difficulty explaining their culture to others. As we will see in chapter 4, this is because so much of what is actually cultural is beyond our awareness. Our life within our culture is like a fish swimming in water, unaware of what makes up its environment.

Culture changes and is changed by its environment

We’ve noticed that cultures are always changing (and staying the same), and we see above that communication works as a major force in both cultural change and stability. But social, political, and even physical environments impact culture. Andean native tribes, like the Aymara, will have cultural aspects that fit the mountain climate, while Western Samoa residents will select behavior suitable to an island culture and a tropical climate. Catastrophes such as the HIV-AIDS virus or the sudden rise of a hard-line military dictatorship can impact cultures. Still, even among mountain indigenous peoples or Sub-Saharan tribal cultures, there will be differences, as each group uses communication to make sense of its environment.

Birth and demographics are not culture

Although culture has different definitions and exists at many levels, one thing that holds all definitions together is that culture is shared. Because of that, we suggest that there are differences between terms such as race, ethnicity, and culture, between sex and gender, and so on. Race refers to supposed biological differences between groups. We say supposed because even scientists who study people groups cannot agree on how many “races” there are, and the biological make-up of people of different racial groups is much more similar than it is different. In fact, race is as much (or more) political and social as it is biological. For example, the United States at one time determined that “one drop” (legally 1/16) of so-called Black blood made one White. The fact that the government did not define it the other way around highlights the racist assumptions of such a law.

Ethnicity is not race or culture; rather, it refers to a sense of shared history and geographical ancestry, usually along with other markers, such as culture, language, or religion (Herbst, 1997). We see that a single race can have people of many different ethnicities, but just because someone in the United States shares Native ancestry (ethnicity), they may not hold any elements of Native culture. Notably, most of these ethnicities refer to regions that only made sense after the rise of the nation state. Ethnicity is usually understood to relate to one’s heritage both in terms of culture and location of ancestry, though many people think in terms of ancestry, even if they do not celebrate the culture of that ancestral group. Herbert Gans (1979) describes what he calls symbolic ethnicity, often held by the third and later generations of an ethnic group in a culture, where rather than engaging in ethnic cultures or organizations, people assimilate to the dominant culture but still use symbols, such as the Jewish star, to represent their identity of ancestry. In sum, ethnicity is not equal to race, nor is either equal to culture. Two people of the same race can be of totally different cultures. Beyond this, we argue that being female, gay, or over 35 does not make one part of a culture unless the person shares communicative meaning with others from that same group.

The aspects of culture are interrelated

Samovar and Porter (2004, p. 44) suggest that “culture is an integrated system.” In other words, if one aspect of a culture changes, that will impact other aspects of the culture. We can see this in the United States after World War II. Many African Americans moved to northern cities to take jobs while White men were at war (though, of course, many African Americans also took part in the war). Aside from the range of new technology that the war inspired, when the soldiers came home, they took their jobs back. There was a rise in union participation (to remove the Blacks from the jobs so the Whites could have them back), and the women who had also taken jobs were sent back home to take care of children. Black joblessness grew, as did segregation in the urban centers; there was a post-war rise of both Black consciousness and women’s rights, and so on.

People may act differently from culture, but that does not mean that culture is not there

Gerry Philipsen and his colleagues (2005) point out that every group that has a language “code” also has a unique culture. They suggest that as long as people follow the norms, rules, and premises of their cultures, we can predict their behavior. But these codes of culture are only guidelines, and people have the agency to follow or not follow them. Brislin (2006) states that even though we can think of cultural mistakes cultural members make—exceptions to the cultural rules—the very fact that we realize they are exceptions proves that there is an overall cultural preference for certain attitudes or behaviors. We would go a step further to note that these are not always “mistakes and errors,” but that many of us seek deliberately to overturn, transgress, or disrupt culture. We saw this in Britain and the United States from the 1970s onward with the Punk Rock movement.

ON THE NET

Mark Rosenfelder, a “con-langer” (creator of constructed languages and worlds)—“mostly after midnight, with a touch of lime”—has created an extensive web page on aspects of language and culture ( http://www.zompist.com ). This includes contributed pages on “How to tell if you’re American” (or Quebequois, Colombian, Swedish, Greek, or Texan). See if it describes your culture. Think about ways that you are like or not like your culture. If you are different from your culture in some ways, what does that mean for you as you communicate with other people from other places?

People in all cultures are ethnocentric

Finally, one thing that all cultures seem to have in common is that they are ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism refers to the belief that our culture or group is better than others. We may not feel this way intentionally, but because of the invisible nature of culture, we fall into the second definition of ethnocentrism: using our cultural framework as a tool with which to guide people from other cultures. We see ethnocentrism in the names we often use for ourselves—Jew and Gentile, Greek and Barbarian. Even many names of people groups are translated, literally, “the people” (e.g., Inuit), the “civilized people” (Titska Watich), or the “original people” (Sahnish) (Original Tribal Names of Native North American People, 2007). Each country’s map seems to highlight or center that country, and in some cases, even the name of the country, like China’s (Figure 3.6) reflects a sense of that country’s location in its own esteem of the world. However, we feel that it is not useful for intercultural effectiveness or for moving and adjusting to other cultures and that it is something that we can learn to recognize and even reduce in ourselves and others.

Figure 3.6 The meaning of a name. Zhong-guo is the Chinese name for China (the English name refers back to a specific dynasty of about 2000 years ago). It is comprised of two symbols, meaning “center country.” While other countries may not show this centering of themselves in their name, all cultures are to some degree ethnocentric.

A model of interaction: How can we best understand intercultural and intergroup communication?

As we have noted, the face-to-face and mediated sharing of messages between people of different cultures is a process of exchange (a transactional process) in which parties bring something to the exchange as producers and consumers of messages. Our question in this section is, with all there is to consider in an intercultural interaction, can we simplify it in such a way that will help us be better communicators? We present here a model of intercultural/intergroup communication that we hope you will find practical. A model of communication is much like a diagram or model of a Vespa, for example, for someone who works on motor scooters. The model should serve to help us make sense of the interaction, but it should also be useful if there is some breakdown in communication to help communicators troubleshoot what has happened in the interaction.

As we have seen above, race and ethnicity are not culture, just as age is not culture. But sometimes, these things impact our communication, even if culture is not present. In this case, we want to begin our model by discussing the first axis, intergroup communication. Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1986), in their social identity theory, suggest that we always perceive others on some continuum from interpersonal to intergroup. They argue that we always see people, at least in part, in terms of the groups to which they belong (see chapter 6). In the case of war or intergroup conflict, we often see members of the other group only as group members. If we have a spouse or lover, we probably see that person mostly in terms of interpersonal aspects—we interact with them and have expectations of their behavior in terms of our personal knowledge of them. As we get to know people, we move from seeing them only as group members to knowing them more and more as individuals (interpersonal communication). Still, at some point, the groups to which we and the others belong are probably still in the back of our minds.

William Gudykunst and Tae-Sop Lim (1986) modified this original model to account for things such as intercultural romantic relationships, by treating interpersonal and intergroup as two separate dimensions (two axes of our model), with both ranging from low to high. Communicators could perceive a given interaction as high in both intercultural and intergroup aspects, such as when two people from different ethnic groups are close friends and both understand each other in terms of individual characteristics and validate the groups to which the other belongs. One could be high in intergroup perception but low in interpersonal perception (seeing the person only as a group member), or high only on interpersonal (interacting with the other primarily as an individual). But one could also be low on both factors. This might happen in a culture that treats people primarily in terms of role relationships. We might interact with the cashier at the pharmacy or the person who cleans our building as a “non-person,” acting as if they are not even there except to meet functional needs. Here, both group identification and interpersonal perception are low.

Although Gudykunst and Lim’s (1986) revision is good, it treats intercultural and intergroup communication the same. In our model, we separate these to create a third axis—intercultural communication. If cultures exist, as we suggest above, from very large to very small—such as organizational cultures, classroom cultures, and so on, then we could easily say that all communication is inherently intercultural, and the term ceases to have any meaning. We define intercultural communication, then, as communication in which cultural differences are large enough to impact the production or consumption of messages. But more realistically, communication can range from very low on the intercultural aspect to extremely high.

Thus, we present a model with three axes (Figure 3.7), with three dimensions that can exist from low to high. The three dimensions are unrelated, so we have to imagine the model in three-dimensional space. The interpersonal axis reflects the degree to which we see and treat the person as an individual. This axis is important because it reminds us that, even if we are speaking with members of other groups or cultures, we are ultimately speaking to or listening to media created by individuals, who will both reflect and differ from their cultures. The intergroup axis deals with our perception of the other as a group member. Thus, it deals with our perceptions of and feelings toward the other group, and includes things such as stereotypes and prejudice (see chapter 6). We might interact with someone in our neighborhood who looks different from us and act assuming the person is different—even if we are culturally the same. The third axis, intercultural communication, deals with real differences in everything from values and world view to verbal and nonverbal communication, to cultural perceptions of roles and how people should act in those roles (e.g., as teachers and students). If this dimension is high but the intergroup dimension is low, we might talk with someone who looks like us and think that they are from “our” group, but without our awareness, cultural differences may impact the conversation. In media and rhetorical communication, the interpersonal dimension will likely be low (unless an audience member knows the speaker or media producer), but the cultural dimension may be important, and, on the intergroup dimension, someone might discount a speaker or media message simply because of the group that she, he, or it represents.

Figure 3.7 A three-axis model of communication. Communication with anyone will have three aspects that become more or less important in interaction: perception of the other as an individual, perception of the other as a group member, and real cultural differences.

All interactions can be thought of in terms of these three dimensions. If Helena, a Chilean manager, is talking to Carlos, a representative from his culture in Colombia, cultural differences may be present, but not as large as if he were from The Philippines. When they first work together, the interpersonal element will be low, but will increase the more direct contact they have. But if Claudio is Afro-Colombian, each may come to the interaction with stereotypes about the other race (or the other sex, or the fact that Francisca does not speak the Colombian variety of Spanish or that Claudio grew up in a small town, unlike Francisca’s big city). In this case, the problem will not be cultural differences—these, in fact, might be minimal—but rather perceived differences. Their interaction would be high in intergroup communication. Likely, all three elements may shift in importance between and even within interactions between the two of them.

Summary

In this chapter we considered the nature of communication and culture and their relationship to each other. Some feel that culture should best be treated as a variable that predicts communication; others see communication as a process that is continually shaping culture. These two views seem to oppose each other, though they do not need to. A constitutive view of communication allows us to consider that communication shapes culture, which in turn shapes communication, and so on. Definitions of culture and communication reflect the same ways of thinking (paradigms) that have influenced the fields that look at culture and communication, especially scientific, humanistic, and critical ways of thinking (see chapter 2). We might think of culture like a suitcase of things (values, beliefs, artifacts, norms) that we pass on to the next generation, as a never-ending process, or as a struggle between groups for power for power or prestige.

Finally, we presented a model of communication that considers three dimensions—individual, intergroup, and intercultural. This model shows us that we are always communicating with individuals from cultures and groups, not the groups themselves. But it also shows us that as we communicate with someone in another culture, like a United States person talking with someone from France, stereotypes and prejudice, and not only cultural difference, may be present. So also, two people in the same culture might think that there are differences just because the other person looks different or wears a different political or religious name, but in terms of real differences in values, beliefs, and behaviors, the two could be very much the same.

How we think about culture is important for civic and political engagement. If we are engaged, our action shapes the cultures with which we interact, or our own culture. Our action or inaction, at a minimum, reproduces and shapes our culture. But some causes in which we are involved also involve us in ideology struggles within our culture. Gun control is currently a controversial issue in the United States. The right to own guns to protect oneself against a tyrannical government is written into the U.S. constitution. But as we get involved to address bullying in schools, to provide support to those who have been at schools where there are shootings, or to advocate for the continued right to own guns in the face of increasing government restrictions on gun ownership, we engage in a debate that shapes culture. After one recent school shooting, there were calls not to make the issue political, though even silence in the face of such issues provides support for whatever the status quo way of thinking is. The way we think about culture and cultures will shape the way we describe other cultures and work and interact with people from those cultures, in and out of civic engagement efforts. Hopefully, a more complex view of culture and its components will help us to interact with people as individuals informed by their cultures, and see their cultures as complex and dynamic.