

Intercultural Sensitivity

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Intercultural Sensitivity

From Denial to Intercultural Competence

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Preface

This book is a first approach of what can happen at the university or business schools where students of all nationalities and cultures come together.

You are going to read an enlightening testimony on what could happen to you students when working later in companies, without being aware of the content of this book.

The authors most warmly thank **Mr Luis Miguel Rojo Y Pinto** for sharing his field experience with the students.

“With both parents from Spanish origin, I was born in France and considered myself as being a pure multicultural product, till I had to settle in Latin America a few years ago. That’s where I got my first real “intercultural slap” while having a meeting with Columbian engineers. As we were looking into security issues for our vehicles, my purpose had been to concentrate on the necessity to fit them out with series airbags and ABS. One of them just replied that security was essentially linked to the engine power, which was vital to overtake on the overcrowded roads of this magnificent country.

This anecdote cruelly brought me back to the notion of context.

Another example: when a Marketing team in Venezuela presented me with a very interesting project, I let out a vibrating “Not bad!” which made the Project Manager immediately turn pale and asked me why I didn’t like that project. This was all a question of interpretation, “Not bad” in Venezuela is a polite way to say you refuse the project. Consequently, when working for a Korean brand, I had to change the way I defended and presented the projects to the Korean executives, presuming that it was impossible for them to lose face opposite their counterparts with the same power distance, even if I had previously succeeded in obtaining their agreement. All a question of culture.

I am now working with Nissan, in a Regional Business Unit, bringing together France, the Netherlands and Belgium. It is a daily concern to me as I am confronted to the difficulty

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to adapt communication patterns in order to align multicultural teams and meet shared goals. Strange as it may seem, a French “yes” is not necessarily interpreted in the same way as a Dutch “yes”. There is no such thing as a universal way of applying the filters we get from our upbringing, our social environment or our experience. Even if we are used to global environments and we have the feeling that we do know “the world” through all kinds of media and tools at our disposal, we are not always aware of the need for decoding the messages. In that case, we have to use our counterparts’ references and not ours.

This book is based on real examples and exercises and enables the reader to, not only understand why the exchange of messages that seem clear are not understood, but also to ponder on questions about his own story. In each chapter you will find basic principles which throw a light on the differences in interpretation between cultures. Take some time and hindsight to consider those aspects and you will most probably avoid blunders that can sometimes cause violent shocks. Those are more often related to the use of an inadequate form rather than to a disagreement on the content.”

Luis Miguel Rojo Y Pinto, Marketing General Manager, Nissan West Europe

1 Culture, Communication and Global Citizenship

Introduction and Definitions

- 1.1 **What is Culture? Visible and Invisible Culture**
- 1.2 **Definition of Culture**
- 1.3 **Cultural Programming**
- 1.4 **Culture and Subcultures**
- 1.5 **Intercultural Communication**
- 1.6 **Noise. What Exactly is Communication Noise?**
- 1.7 **TOPOI Model, Intervention for Cultural Noise**
- 1.8 **Global Citizenship**
- 1.9 **Assignments**

In this chapter we will define culture, intercultural communication and Global Citizenship. Culture is learned. Culture influences the way we think, feel and behave. It even shapes our perception and influences our judgment of others. We are not always aware of the impact of culture on the way we communicate. The aim of this chapter is to become more aware of our own culture, how it influences our communication, and how we can become better intercultural communicators in an interconnected world, as true Global Citizens.

1.1 What is Culture? Visible and Invisible Culture

According to the interculturalist Edgar Schein, culture consists of layers, like an onion.

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Illustration 1.1 Cultural onion.

1. Artefacts of Culture
2. Norms and Values
3. Basic Assumptions

1. The outer layer, or material culture, we call *artefacts of culture*. Artefacts are the first things you notice when entering a new country. Foreigners arriving in the Netherlands notice: the bicycle lanes, large windows and open curtains, the tall people, and how they dress. They notice that a lot of Dutch people eat bread and drink milk at lunchtime. The first time you enter a new company, you'll notice the artefacts: company logo, company house-style, and whether or not the employees wear ties. Artefacts are easy to perceive, and they're nice to know, but intercultural communication is not going to be about artefacts.

2. The second layer we call the *norms and values*. They are written and unwritten standards of correct, desired behaviour. Is it the norm to arrive in class a few minutes early, exactly on time or is it the custom to be a few minutes late? Is 3 minutes late acceptable and 10 minutes not? These are examples of norms. Values express what we think is good or right. For example, is it good to stand up for an elderly person on a crowded bus? Is it right to send a card or make a phone call to a classmate who is ill? Norms and values are not as visible as artefacts. It takes some time to notice, let alone learn them. But with the necessary effort and observation, they can be learned.

3. The deepest layer is that of the *basic assumptions*. They are abstract and invisible, we learn them very young – before we are 7 – and we are unaware of their influence.

Yet the perception of the world around us, and the judgements we make about others, are very much shaped or distorted by the basic assumptions of our culture. Intercultural communication is about bringing basic assumptions of our own culture to our awareness and to recognise the basic assumptions of other cultures. This is in order to communicate creatively and more effectively with people from other cultures, to use cultural diversity at work as a source of inspiration and growth, and to achieve cultural synergy. In chapter 5 of this book we will present a 3-step strategy on how to achieve cultural synergy.

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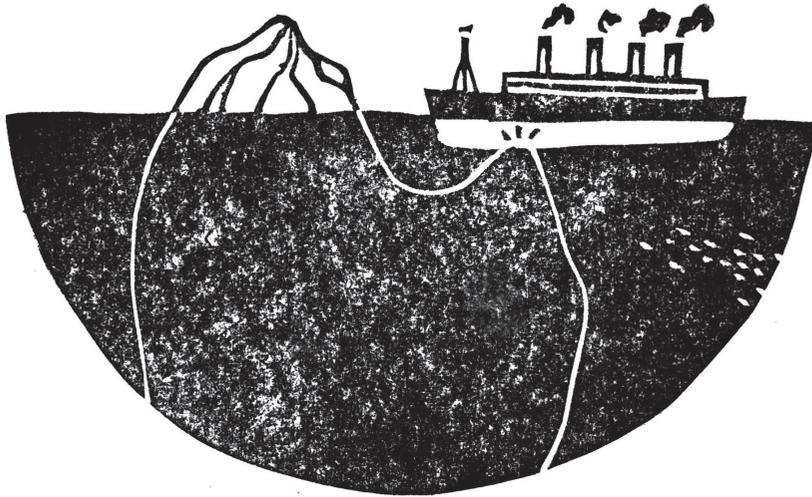


Illustration 1.2 Cultural iceberg and the Titanic as metaphor of cultural clashes on the invisible level of culture: the basic assumptions.

1.2 Definition of Culture

This book is not going to be about Culture with the capital C such as literature, art, music, theatre, museums and architecture. It is about culture with the little c. It is about the familiar way we think, feel and behave. How we learned this and share the meaning of it with other members of our society. The list of definitions of culture is endless. The table below gives four definitions. We have chosen this short definition by interculturalist Geert Hofstede:

“Culture is the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group (...) of people from another.”

Some Definitions of Culture

1. Edgar Schein defines culture as... “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” (Schein, 2004)
2. Mijnd Huijser defines culture as ... “a group’s set of shared norms and values expressed in the behaviour of the group’s members.” (Huijser, 2006)
3. Fons Trompenaars: “Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems.” (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1998)
4. Geert Hofstede: “Culture is the collective programming of the human mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” (Hofstede, 1991)

1.3 Cultural Programming

Culture is learned. Hofstede calls it *programming*. You could also call it ‘learning’, like Edgar Schein does. We are programmed through upbringing, socialization, norms and values, and perception.

A lot of programming comes with our *upbringing*. Take a simple handshake. There’s nothing natural about it. No child would dream of shaking hands unless it was programmed to do so. “Be a good boy, be a good girl now, shake hands.” This is repeated and drilled so often that you end up thinking that shaking hands is normal.

A lot of other things we learn through *socialization*, by interacting with others. To stay with the handshake, do you give a limp handshake? A firm one? A crunch? Through socialization you learn just how firm a desirable handshake is, and even the right smile and amount of eye contact to go with it. In Europe, a firm handshake is desirable. And you would associate a limp hand with weakness of character. In many Asian countries, firm handshakes are seen as aggressive, and people find a modest, gentle handshake more polite. We are also programmed through norms and values. If we value showing respect for older people, and the norm is to give your seat to an elderly person on the bus, you will feel good when you stand up for someone older, and feel uneasy if you don’t. In some countries the norm is to give up your seat to children, because children are small and vulnerable.

Finally, part of the programming happens through *perception*. Just by looking around us we make conscious or unconscious choices about how we want to behave.

Does programming reduce us to cultural robots then? No. Regardless of culture, each person is a unique individual and makes choices, for example, to follow or to deviate from the cultural group norms.

There are three levels of programming:

Individual
Cultural
Human Nature

If we haven't eaten for days, human nature makes us look for something to eat and devour it with our hands! That we decide to put the food on a plate and eat it with fork and knife is our cultural programming. However, individuals may choose not to use fork and knife, regardless of their cultural programming or what society thinks. Similarly, in some cultures, your programming teaches you always to share food with others and never to eat on your own. There too, individuals may choose to eat it up all by themselves, regardless of the community's disapproval or possible sanctions.

Now let's move on to the word *collective*.

1.4 Culture and Subcultures

In "Culture is the collective mental programming of the human mind", *collective* indicates the group or subgroups we belong to. It does not mean that the whole country is one big group, or shares one set of cultural patterns. On the contrary, there are a lot of subgroups or subcultures we belong to: a regional culture, middle-class culture, or company culture, each with their different programming.

Here is a list of possible subcultures:

- A continent (Asian culture, American culture)
- A country (the Chinese culture, the Somalian culture)
- Ethnic (the culture of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, such as the Indonesian, Surinam, Moroccan or Turkish culture)
- Regional (for example the Andalusian, the Basque or the Catalan culture in Spain)
- Urban or rural culture

- Religion (Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist culture)
- Social class (middle-class culture, for example)
- Gender (the culture of men, women, the LGBT culture)
- Age (culture of young people, of the baby-boomers, or the pre-war generation)
- Profession (health-care, engineering, or economics and management culture)
- Hobby (the culture of hockey, soccer, stamp collectors, chess-players, salsa dancers, gamers or gardeners)
- Corporate (differences between cultures of the Utrecht University and Utrecht University of Applied Sciences.)

The list is fairly complete, but not exhaustive.

It is good to be aware of differences as well as similarities and overlaps in our subcultures. And to have an open attitude for understanding multiple identities and a collective identity. Dutch and international students at the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, involved in a management simulation game called Intopia, found that their professional interest was such a uniting factor, that it helped them transcend their initial national and regional cultural differences. They worked together outstandingly.

Culturally diverse teams. Are they the worst or the best? Both. If left unmanaged, and when cultural differences are ignored, culturally diverse teams can have a lot of problems understanding each other and coming to an agreement. If managed and trained in intercultural sensitivity, and when cultural differences are appreciated, they turn out to be the most creative and dynamic teams. We will expand on this in chapter 8.

1.5 Intercultural Communication

Communication is the exchange of meaning. If you want to give information to another person, you are the source. Your information is encoded by using the appropriate language, gestures or nonverbal expressions. It is transmitted through a channel, which is the medium for communication. In face-to-face verbal communication it is the air and the space between you, if it is written communication it is paper, with e-mails the medium is electronic. The receiver decodes your message and responds or gives feedback, once again encoding the response. You decode it. The whole process of communication is an on-going, circular process.

All communication takes place within a context, for example, in a business context or a family context. A crisis situation is another context. And an international setting has an intercultural context.

Intercultural communication is the communication between sources and receivers from different cultures, and good intercultural communication requires an interculturally sensitive attitude, cultural knowledge, as well as skills in frame-of-reference-shifting. In short, it requires intercultural competence. Because culture has its impact on every point in the communication circles: encoding, decoding, feedback and choice of medium. A well-intended message, well coded in one culture, can have a totally different meaning, even a very rude one, when decoded in another culture. Or when transmitted through the wrong channel – for example by e-mail instead of face-to-face. We are often unaware of this, because it involves cultural differences in the deepest, invisible layer of culture – the basic assumptions. Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 of this book bring these cultural basic assumptions to our awareness, as key concepts, as values and as dimensions. Chapter 6 contributes to developing intercultural sensitivity and frame-of-reference-shifting skills, so that we can communicate in international settings with greater intercultural competence.

Sometimes misunderstanding is caused by what we call ‘noise’ in the communication.

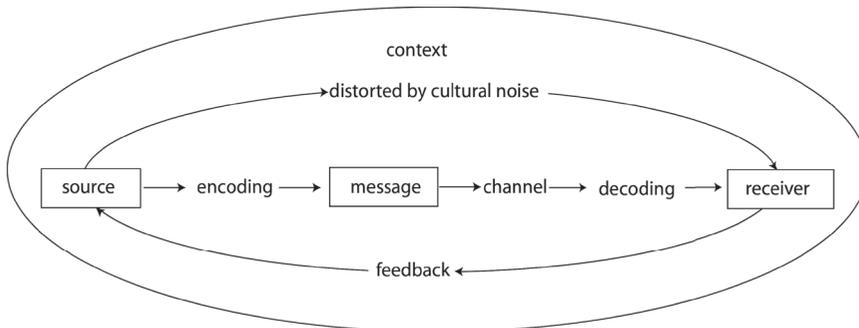


Illustration 1.3 Intercultural communication is the communication between sources and receivers from different cultures.

1.6 Noise. What Exactly is Communication Noise?

Noise is anything that distorts or blocks the message, that distracts the receivers or causes them not to understand the message. We will distinguish external, internal and cultural noise.

External noise, also known as physical noise, is interference from the environment. External noise makes it difficult for the receiver to understand you. For example, people next to you are talking very loud, and you can't hear what I say. Or the person sitting in front of you is wearing a large hat, and blocks the screen.