



New Trends
in Psychology

Intercultural Communication in Complex Interactions

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Abstract: The article addresses the complexity and importance of intercultural communication in the context of globalization and global interdependence. Two perspectives of intercultural communication stand out: interaction between different societies and interactions between cultural or ethnic groups within the same society. The authors discuss the communicative process as being more than the transmission of messages, involving the interpretation of meanings, contexts and intentions. Still, despite cultural differences, interpersonal communication remains at the core of intercultural interaction and requires specific skills for success. Intercultural communication skills are essential for effectively navigating interactions. The authors describe intercultural communication as a dynamic process in which different thought processes, values, customs and languages intersect. The role of the psychologist in enhancing intercultural communication, providing individual counselling and mediation in conflict resolution is explored. It highlights the importance of understanding cultural barriers, such as prejudice and stereotyping, and the role of psychologists as guides and facilitators in the intercultural communication process.

Keywords: cultural interactions; cultural differences; interpersonal communication; intercultural communication; prejudice

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Introduction

Globalization, interdependence and global connectivity are transforming the way we interact, trade and understand each other. Open borders, the uniting of countries in various forms of alliances, the expansion of international corporations, increased business contacts, growing tourism and migration are key elements shaping the modern world, making it an increasingly integrated and interdependent place. Under these conditions, intercultural communication has a major contemporary significance.

To understand the nature of communication across cultural boundaries, it is important to explore several aspects of this complex phenomenon.

Şamne N. L. (2003, p.75) emphasizes two distinct levels of intercultural communication: a broad and a narrow sense. In the “broad sense”, intercultural communication refers to interactions between people from different societies and cultural backgrounds, which often means interaction between individuals from different countries or regions, each with their own distinct cultural, linguistic and social systems. The “narrow sense” of intercultural communication, on the other hand, refers to communication taking place between different cultural or ethnic groups within the same society, even when they share the same language. This type of intercultural communication is common in multicultural or multiethnic countries, where different cultural groups coexist and interact within the same social and political structures. This is also confirmed by Leontiev A. A. (1971) who emphasizes the complexity of the communicative process itself, showing that it goes beyond the simple transmission of coded messages and includes the interpretation of meanings, contexts and intentions. His approach to the communicative process emphasizes the importance of understanding communication as a dynamic and interactive process, involving not only language but also cultural, social and emotional factors.

Regardless of cultural differences between individuals, the foundations of communication - the exchange of ideas, feelings and information between people - remain constant. Turuc I. F. and Lobanova E. I. (2011, p. 26) state that “interpersonal character is manifested in any form of intercultural communication”, thus emphasizing the idea that interpersonal communication is at the basis of any intercultural interaction. Vevea N. N. (2011, p. 101) complements this concept by identifying specific interpersonal communication skills that are important for successful communication in intercultural contexts “active and effective listening, social skills, identity and negotiation management, selection of appropriate

communication strategies, coordination of interactions, and the ability to form and maintain strong interpersonal relationships”. Interpersonal communication skills are fundamental to any effective interaction, regardless of cultural context being “Other-oriented” Beebe S. A., Beebe S. J. and Redmond M. V. (2009, p. 12).

However, Kim offers a detailed perspective (2010, p. 454) on the differences between intercultural and interpersonal communication. The author argues that “these two forms of communication can be conceptually separated based on the degree of difference in the cultural or subcultural meaning systems, knowledge, values, and cultural or subcultural views assimilated by the communicators”. In this context, intercultural communication involves a confrontation and exchange between individuals who have been shaped and influenced by diverse cultural backgrounds, each with their own meaning and value systems. This complexity adds an additional layer of difficulty to the communication process since it involves not only understanding language but also interpreting and appreciating different value and meaning systems. Allwood J. (1985) identifies four main cultural dimensions that influence intercultural communication: thinking patterns (beliefs, values, norms and emotional attitudes), behaviour patterns (common ways of acting and interacting, whether consciously or unconsciously, individually or collectively), artefact patterns (concern how material objects are created and used, from simple tools to advanced technologies) and imprints in nature (long-lasting changes made by humans in the natural environment, such as agriculture or architectural structures). These dimensions are reflected and extended in the model proposed by Moreau A. S., Campbell E. H. and Greener S. (2014, p. 13) who describe four levels of culture. The first level comprises universal aspects of humanity such as language and values. The second level focuses on values specific to large cultures or nations, reflecting how patterns of behaviour and artefacts vary according to the broader cultural context. The third level recognizes the existence of subcultures, which aligns with Allwood J.’s (1985) idea of the diversity of practices and behaviours within different groups. Finally, the fourth level emphasizes the individuality and genetic uniqueness of each individual, stressing that even in collective cultures, each person has his or her own patterns of thought and behaviour. These perspectives emphasize how different levels of culture interact to influence intercultural communication, with each dimension or level adding a layer of complexity.

In this context, individuals need to be equipped with a set of intercultural communicative competencies to navigate intercultural interactions effectively. Intercultural communication involves much more than simply exchanging

information between people from different cultural backgrounds. According to his approach, Jerry L. Burk (p. 43) it “is a subfield of verbal communication that focuses on the nature of communicative transactions that cross cultural boundaries. Culture is an attribute of cross-cultural communication, not a variable because a person’s cultural component does not vary to greater or lesser degrees. However, a person’s cultural characteristics change with learning, experience and motivation. Communication and culture develop together as simultaneously emerging systems that exert reciprocal influences on each other.” In essence, intercultural communication is a complex and multifaceted process going beyond the simple transmission of information between individuals from different cultures. It is a crossroads where diverse thought processes, values, customs and languages meet, creating unique opportunities and considerable challenges.

The first of these competencies is cognition, which, according to Ruben (1976, p. 336), involves “the ability to conceptualize and articulate the variables, dimensions, and issues that need to be considered to explain or predict effective functioning in a given situation.” This refers not only to familiarity with different cultures but also to the ability to understand the subtleties and nuances that influence intercultural interactions. The second competence is the repeatable and goal-directed ability “to display behaviours considered appropriate and functional by others” (Ruben, 1976, p. 336). This means not only knowing what to do in a given situation but also being able to apply these skills consistently and effectively in different intercultural contexts.

In addition, Wiseman (2002, p. 211) identifies motivation as an intercultural communication competence, which he describes as “the set of feelings, intentions, needs, and impulses associated with anticipating or effectively engaging in intercultural communication.” This emphasizes the importance of a positive attitude and a genuine desire to learn and interact with other cultures. Motivation provides the required impetus to overcome obstacles and to actively seek deeper understanding and more effective communication in varied intercultural contexts. The emphasis that these components need to be ‘consciously and consistently performed’ suggests that intercultural competence is not only about having the knowledge, motivation and skills but also about actively and continuously applying them in intercultural interactions. It is a dynamic process involving continuous learning and adaptation.

In the “Rainbow Model of Intercultural Communication Competence” developed by Kupka B., Everett A. and Wildermuth S. (2007), a set of fundamental components that define intercultural communication is described: The ability to speak and understand foreign languages, the ability to navigate cultural differences and similarities, the level of self-awareness from cultural perspective, the level of knowledge about different cultures, the skill set necessary for effective cross-cultural communication, the degree of interest and willingness to engage in intercultural communication, the ability to choose appropriate communication strategies in different cultural contexts, the ability to achieve desired goals in intercultural communication, understanding the influence of context on intercultural communication, and developing a deep affinity or interest in other cultures. Thus, the given model shows that intercultural communication competence is multidimensional and requires a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that undergoes a continuous process of learning and adaptation.

In terms of communicative behaviour, a distinction can be made between behaviour produced by a single individual and behaviour that requires the interaction and/or cooperation of several individuals. Allwood J. (1985, p. 4) calls the first type of behaviour “individual behaviour” and the other, “interactive behaviour”. The fact that a behaviour is individual does not mean that it is unaffected by other individuals, such as another person’s choice of words. It just means that the choice of words can be attributed to an individual, whereas the types of behaviour that are interactive cannot be attributed to an individual alone. Moreau A. S., Campbell E. H. and Greener S. (2014, p. 17) posit that each individual construct in the communicative process a personal and dynamic “meaning system” that remains unfathomable to other participants in the communicative process. This meaning system consists of four interconnected and mutually influential components, which are: the common human core, (the set of universal characteristics and experiences of humanity); the individual’s specific cultural context, (the values, norms and beliefs inherent in his/her culture); the person’s unique idiosyncratic dimension (individual traits, experiences and preferences); and the particularities of the current communicative event, including the specific context and circumstances. These constituent elements, through their interaction, generate a complex matrix that shapes how the individual chooses to encode and transmit his or her messages, anticipating how the receiver will decode and interpret them.

Although each individual has a unique system of meanings that guides communication, social interactions and group perceptions can profoundly affect this

system, altering how we communicate and relate to others. Thus, the complexity of the personal meaning system and the dynamics of group formation intersect, mutually influencing identity and social perceptions. Related to this idea, in a controlled experiment Tajfel H. (1982) showed that group formation based on either insignificant or non-existent traits leads to prejudice and exclusion of those from other groups. The segmentation of society into individuals and groups, dividing them into those who belong and those who do not, facilitates the establishment of secure orientations in a complex social framework. This process supports the development of a strong “sense of belonging” and strengthens the individual’s social identity. According to Goico E. V. (2011, p. 48), factors such as prejudice, ethnocentrism, and the way a person from a particular culture perceives what is “ours” and “foreign” can influence and alter the way meanings are constructed and interpreted in communication. Sadohin A. P. (2007, p. 16) insists that the objective roots of the use of “the notion of ‘ours’ must be sought in the biological nature of man, according to which each individual possesses an instinctive reaction to familiar and ordinary features and conditions of his or her life”. This concept emphasizes the human predisposition towards familiarity and the fundamental importance of this tendency in structuring and influencing social experiences and relationships. “Ours” - means familiar, ordinary, which poses no danger to the individual, or community. In contrast comes the concept of “stranger” in the context of intercultural communication, where Malecke G. (1996) approaches it as an endeavour to ensure that no visitor brings harm to the host culture. The author identifies several interpretations of the notion of “stranger”: of being from another area or culture; in terms of being unusual or in contrast to familiar surroundings; meaning unknown or inaccessible in terms of knowledge; perceived as being of a supernatural or omnipotent nature, in the face of which people feel helpless; seen as a potential threat to safety and life. Feşchinoi I. A.’s (2009, p. 56) observations about the formation of the image of a friend (“belonging” to the group) versus that of an “outsider” are particularly relevant in the context of intercultural communication. In intercultural interactions, this phenomenon, where “strangers” are often seen as belonging to a different culture, can lead to the intensification of prejudice. This tendency to see someone as part of “ours” or “theirs” profoundly influences how we communicate and interact in an intercultural context. Extending this concept, Thomas A. (2004) points out that prejudice goes beyond simply attributing negative traits to certain national, ethnic or minority groups. They also manifest themselves in hasty and unwarranted conclusions, based on limited information, about a variety of subjects, including individuals, objects, institutions or even products. Feşchinoi I. A. (2009,

p. 56) states that in general, the communication of members of any social group is marked by prejudices of various kinds. The individual behaves in a way that is expected by his interlocutors and, in turn, expects from them an anticipation of his verbal behaviour.

The psychologist, with an arsenal of diverse skills and knowledge, is an essential piece in the dynamic of improving intercultural communication. Their role transcends traditional counselling barriers, extending into the complex and dynamic field of interactions between different cultures. They bring a deep understanding of human behaviour and mental processes, applying this knowledge to facilitate better understanding and collaboration between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. We will report on just some aspects of this range of work:

- **Assessing cultural barriers** in intercultural communication is a complex process, involving understanding and addressing several key factors, such as prejudice, stereotyping, language differences and interpretation of non-verbal behaviour. Prejudices, often unconscious, can distort how we interpret others' messages. They represent negative judgments made without sufficient knowledge and can be countered through education and awareness. On the other hand, stereotypes, which are deeply rooted in the collective mind, are much more difficult to change (Bischof M., Kessler V. & Krechel R., 2003). To avoid the formation of prejudices and stereotypes, special attention should be paid to the nuances and connotations of different words in different cultural contexts. The use of translators or simplified and clear language may be suggested to overcome these difficulties, thus facilitating clearer communication and avoiding misunderstandings.
- **Individual counselling and support** involve a deep process of understanding and personalized support. When it comes to adapting to a new culture, clients need to be helped to navigate the complexities and difficulties of this process: managing culture shock, a common experience for those moving to a different culture, can be overwhelming and disorienting. Providing the client with a safe space to express their fears, uncertainties and difficulties in the new cultural context will help the client to identify and understand the specific elements that cause distress. In terms of intercultural conflicts which can be fuelled not only by obvious misunderstandings but also by subtle differences in values, expectations and communication norms. Counselling sessions work with clients to deconstruct these differences and find ways to address them respectfully and productively. This may involve developing

communication skills, learning how to give and receive feedback in a manner sensitive to cultural context, and building bridges of understanding across cultures.

- Individual counselling can also be extremely valuable in helping clients develop **greater self-awareness in an intercultural context**. This involves exploring one's own values, beliefs and prejudices, and understanding how these may influence interactions with others. Through this increase in self-awareness, clients can become more flexible and open in dealing with cultural differences, thus facilitating adaptation and reducing conflict.
- **Mediation in intercultural conflict resolution** brings to the table not only technical mediation skills but also a deep understanding of the cultural and psychological dynamics that can fuel conflict. In their role as mediators, psychologists go beyond being mere facilitators of dialogue but act as experts in navigating and reconciling the diverse, often contradictory perspectives of the parties involved. Cross-cultural conflicts are not just surface disputes but often reflect a deeper layer of cultural and personal disagreements. Analysing these differences, bringing them to light and open discussion in the mediation process helps the parties to recognize and respect cultural diversity and find common ground.

Essentially, the psychologist's role in intercultural mediation and conflict resolution is to be a guide, facilitator and expert in human and cultural dynamics. Through their abilities to open channels of communication and facilitate mutual understanding, psychologists can help transform intercultural conflicts from obstacles into opportunities for growth, learning and mutual understanding.

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