WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FLEXIBILITY?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I met my wife years ago in San Francisco. It was love at first sight. She was funny, energetic, and incredibly passionate about life. Lili was the last person I thought I would date, much less marry, and part of the reason was our faith. I was born and raised in Turkey and am a Muslim. Lili was a Peruvian native but Jewish. Muslim and Jewish?! Are you kidding me? We worked it out and her parents embraced me as their own child, despite our many differences, as did mine. The true test to our relationship started when we decided to have children. How do we raise our children? After many arguments, discussions, and "if" statements, Lili got pregnant. We had a girl and decided that girls in our family will be raised in the Jewish faith. Should Allah bring me a boy, he would be raised Muslim.

Four girls later, I never regretted that decision. The most amazing moment of my life came when my oldest daughter, Leyla, had her Bat Mitzvah. I went to the temple, wore a *yamaka* (head cap), and became part of the service. Many people who attended could not believe I would do such a thing, but the most important gift I can give my daughter is compassion and love and the realization that religious faith will not divide our family. I was there for the next two Bat Mitzvahs and we have one more to go!

Last year, I took Lili and my family to Turkey. My parents had the opportunity to meet their grandchildren and the very special moment came when as a family we walked together to the Mosque. They were all dressed respectfully in Islamic attire.

—T. Senel, *Father*

To communicate adaptively with culturally different others, we must understand the major characteristics that make up the intercultural communication process. Although both culture and communication reciprocally influence one another, it is essential to distinguish between the characteristics of the two concepts for the purpose of understanding the complex relationship between them. Having already introduced the defining features of culture in Chapter 1, in this chapter we define the term "intercultural communication" for you. Although the idea of "culture" is an elastic concept that takes on multiple shades of meaning, similarly, the concept "communication" is also dynamic and subject to multifaceted interpretations.

In this chapter, we address the following three questions: What is the intercultural communication process? What is intercultural communication flexibility? What are the possible stages in developing intercultural communication flexibility? This chapter is developed in four sections: first, we introduce a culture-based process model to help you understand the "big picture" of the intercultural communication process. Second, we explore with you the concept of intercultural communication flexibility. Third, we introduce a staircase model of developing intercultural communication flexibility. Fourth, we outline general principles to help increase your understanding of the intercultural communication process. We end the chapter with a "Reality Check"—a set of recaps and checkpoints to guide you through your intercultural communication excursions.

DEFINING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A PROCESS MODEL

Intercultural communication takes place when cultural group membership factors (e.g., cultural values) affect our communication process. Intercultural communication is often referred to as a symbolic exchange process between persons of different cultures in their attempts to create shared meanings in a given context. In the symbolic exchange process, intentions are inferred and culture-based interpretations are formed.

To increase your alertness to the intercultural communication process, we identify the characteristics of the intercultural communication process in two subsections: the overall characteristics of the process and the specific meaning characteristics of the intercultural exchange process. Figure 2.1 is a graphic model that represents some of the key elements in an intercultural-based process model.

Intercultural Communication Process: Overall Characteristics

Intercultural communication is defined as *the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system*. The major characteristics of this definition include the following concepts: symbolic exchange, process, different cultural communities, negotiate shared meanings, an interactive situation, and an embedded societal system. Interestingly, the intercultural communication scholar Halualani (2010), in conducting eighty in-depth qualitative interviews, uncovered some interesting distinctions among U.S. students in their conceptualizations of the term "intercultural interaction."

For example, Asian American interviewees focus on the importance of "sameness" (e.g., making them feel equal and comfortable) among diverse individuals and the need to establish "common ground." Latino/a students emphasize the "cultural respect" aspect of intercultural interaction and the importance of recognizing "cultural roots" of the other memberships. African American interviewees focus on intercultural interactions as having "difficult conversations" and recognizing others' stereotypes and prejudices against them. Last, European American students emphasize having intercultural interaction encounters as reflecting their "open-mindedness" and "acceptance of all cultural groups" (Halualani, 2010).
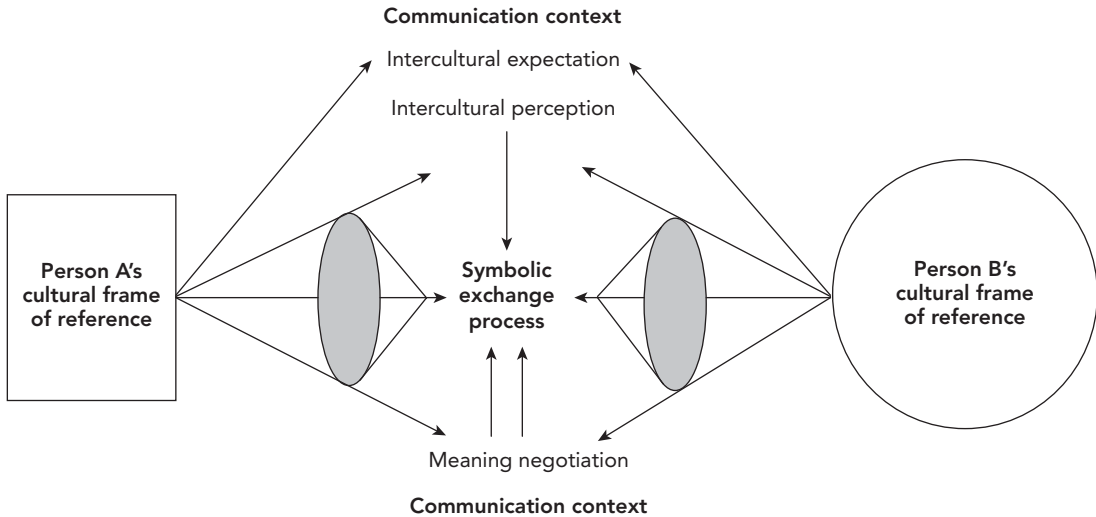
FIGURE 2.1 Intercultural Communication: A Process Model

On a broad-based level, in any intercultural encounter process, individuals use verbal and nonverbal messages to get their ideas across. The first characteristic, **symbolic exchange,** refers to the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols between a minimum of two individuals to accomplish shared meanings. Although verbal symbols represent the digital aspects of our message exchange process, nonverbal symbols or cues (i.e., the smallest identifiable unit of communication), such as smiles, represent the analogical aspects of our message exchange process. Digital aspects of communication refer to the content information that we convey to our listener. The relationship between a digital cue (e.g., the word *angry*) and its interpretation is arbitrary. The word *angry* is a digital symbol that stands for an intense, antagonistic emotional state. The word itself, however, does not carry the feeling: it is people, as symbol users, who infuse the word with intense emotions.

In contrast, analogical aspects of communication refer to the "picturesque" meanings or the affective meanings that we convey through the use of nonverbal cues. Nonverbal cues are analogical because there exists a resemblance relationship between the nonverbal cue (e.g., a frown) and its interpretation (e.g., dislike something). Furthermore, although verbal cues are discrete (i.e., with clear beginning and ending sounds), nonverbal cues are continuous (i.e., different nonverbal cues flow simultaneously with no clear-cut beginning and ending) throughout the message exchange process. Although verbal messages always include the use of nonverbal cues, such as accents and vocal intonations, we can use nonverbal messages, such as touch, without words. As babies, we acquire or soak up the nonverbal cues from our immediate cultural environment before the actual learning of our native tongue.

The second characteristic, **process,** refers to the interdependent nature of the intercultural encounter. Once two cultural strangers make contact and attempt to communicate, they enter into a mutually interdependent relationship. A Japanese businessperson may be bowing, and an American businessperson may be ready to shake hands. The two may also quickly reverse their nonverbal greeting rituals and adapt to each other's behavior. This quick change of nonverbal postures, however, may cause another awkward moment of confusion. The concept of process refers to two ideas: the transactional nature and the irreversible nature of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

The **transactional** nature of intercultural communication refers to the simultaneous encoding (i.e.,

the sender choosing the right words or nonverbal gestures to express his or her intentions) and decoding (i.e., the receiver translating the words or nonverbal cues into comprehensible meanings) of the exchanged messages. When the decoding process of the receiver matches the encoding process of the sender, the receiver and sender of the message have accomplished shared content meanings effectively. Unfortunately, more often than not, intercultural encounters are filled with misunderstandings and second guesses because of language problems, communication style differences, and value-orientation differences.

Furthermore, intercultural communication is an *irreversible process* because the decoder may form different impressions even in regard to the same repeated message. Once an encoder has uttered something to a decoder, he or she cannot repeat the same exact message. The encoder's tone of voice, interaction pace, or facial expression will not stay precisely the same. It is also difficult for any encoder to withdraw or cancel a message once the message has been decoded. For example, if a sender utters a remark such as "I have friends who are Japs!" and then quickly attempts to withdraw the message, this attempt cannot succeed because the message has already created a damaging impact on the receiver's decoding field. Thus, the intercultural communication process is irreversible (Barnlund, 1962).

The third characteristic, **different cultural communities**, is defined as a broad concept. A **cultural community** refers to a group of interacting individuals within a bounded unit who uphold a set of shared traditions and way of life (see Blog Pic 2.1).

This unit can refer to a geographic locale with clear-cut boundaries, such as a nation. This unit can also refer to a set of shared beliefs and values that are subscribed to by a group of individuals who perceive themselves as united even if they are dispersed physically. For example, many Jews, who are dispersed throughout the world, tend to perceive themselves as a united cultural community via their shared religious traditions and beliefs.

Broadly interpreted, a cultural community can refer to a national cultural group, an ethnic group, or a gender group. It is, simultaneously, a group-level concept (i.e., a patterned way of living) and an individual's subjective sense of membership or an affiliation with a group. The term *culture* here is used as a frame of reference or knowledge system that is shared by a large group of individuals within a perceived bounded unit. The "objective" boundaries of a culture may or may not coincide with national or political boundaries. The term can also be used on a specific level to refer to a patterned way of living by an ethnocultural group (i.e., an ethnic group within a culture). Beyond the three characteristics of symbolic, process, and cultural communities,

Blog Pic 2.1   Celebrating with traditional dance is an inherent part of cultural communities.

the next section emphasizes the importance of paying close attention to negotiating shared meanings between members of different identity groups.

Intercultural Communication: Meaning Characteristics

The fourth characteristic, **negotiate shared meanings,** refers to the general goal of any intercultural communication encounter. In intercultural business negotiations or intercultural romantic relationships, a first level of concern is that we want our messages to be understood. When the interpretation of the meaning of the message overlaps significantly with the intention of the meaning of the message, we have established a high level of shared meanings in the communication process. The word negotiate indicates the creative give-and-take nature of the fluid process of human communication. For example, if both communicators are using the same language to communicate, they may ask each other to define and clarify any part of the exchanged message that is perceived as being unclear or vague.

Furthermore, every verbal and nonverbal message contains multiple layers of meanings. The three layers of meaning that are critical to our understanding of how people express themselves in a communication process are content meaning, relational meaning, and identity meaning. **Content meaning** refers to the factual (or digital) information that is being conveyed to the receiver through an oral channel or other communication medium. When the intended content meaning of the encoder has been accurately decoded by the receiver, the communicators have established a level of mutually shared content meanings. Content meaning is usually tied to substantive discussion or issues (e.g., business contract details) with verifiable, factual overtones (i.e., "Did you or did you not say that?"). It also involves what is appropriate to say in a particular cultural scene. For example, in many Asian cultures, it is impolite to say "no" directly to a request. Thus, people from traditional Asian backgrounds will tend to use qualifying statements such as "I agree with you in principle; however…" and "Maybe if I finish studying and if you still want to borrow my lecture notes…" to imply a "no" or "maybe"

answer. In most encounters, however, people are more aware of content meaning negotiation than relational or identity meaning negotiation.

Relational meaning offers information concerning the state of the relationship between the two communicators. Relational meaning is inferred via nonverbal intonations, body movements, or gestures that accompany the verbal content level. It conveys both power distance (e.g., equal–unequal) meanings and relational distance (e.g., friendly–unfriendly) meanings. For example, the professor says, "I want to talk to you about your grade in this class," which can be interpreted as either "You're in serious trouble—I can't believe you handed in such a sloppy paper!" or "I'm concerned about your grade in this class—let me know how I can help you." On the relational level, the professor's statement can be decoded as an intimidating–unfriendly request or a caring–friendly statement. The comment can also be decoded with compliance or resistance by the recipient of the message. The relational meaning of the message often implies how the relationship between the communicators should be defined and interpreted. It is closely linked with identity meaning issues.

Identity meaning refers to the following questions: "Who am I and who are you in this interaction episode?" "How do I define myself in this interaction scene?" and "How do I define you in this interaction scene?" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). Identity meaning involves issues such as the display of respect or disrespect and identity approval or disapproval. Decoders typically infer identity meanings through the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, nonverbal postures, spatial distance, and selective word choices. Nonverbal tones or gestures, however, are highly culture dependent and are oftentimes easily misinterpreted.

For example, the statement: "Maria Montoya? Come over here!" can be rephrased as "Ms. Montoya, when you have a minute, I would really like to talk to you" or "Maria, don't you understand my English? I need to talk to you right now!" or "Dr. Montoya, please, when you have some time, I would really appreciate your advice on this." These different statements indicate different shades of respect accorded to the addressee—depending on the tone of voice and

whether the individual is addressed with her title—and also situational and cultural contexts.

The characteristics of content, relational, and identity meaning negotiation constitute the dynamic nature of the intercultural communication process. The process can take place in either a face-to-face or a mediated situation through e-mail, cellular phone, Twitter, blogs, or the teleconferencing context. Thus, the communication situation, the nature of the topical exchange, the relational features, the language use, the technological medium, and the cultural territory in which the exchange took place all have a profound influence on the symbolic exchange process itself.

The fifth characteristic, an **interactive situation,** refers to the idea that every communication episode occurs in a relational context, a psychological context, and a physical context. Throughout this book, we will use **relational context** examples of intercultural acquaintance relationships, friendships, dating relationships, and business relationships to illustrate diverse relationship contexts. A **psychological context,** in turn, refers to our psychological moods (e.g., anxious versus secure), meaning-making interpretations (e.g., perceived meanings of the formal or informal interactive setting), and normative role expectations of a given situation. Last, a **physical context** refers to the immediate physical features (e.g., furniture or seating arrangement in a room, temperature) and layouts surrounding the face-to-face or mediated interaction. We acquire the meanings to these situational features via the primary socialization process of our culture and family system.

The sixth characteristic, **societal embedded system,** refers to the multilayered contexts such as history, politics, economics, social class, formal institutions, and policies, as well as the community or organizational contexts that shape the process and the outcome of the actual intercultural communication encounter (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Rinderle, 2006). Transactional human communication always takes place within an interactive situation and is subjected to the influence of the multilayered factors in the larger societal environment.

We also encourage you to think of additional examples and questions to clarify your own understanding of important concepts that affect the intercultural communication encounter's conditions, processes, and outcomes. The next section introduces the intercultural communication flexibility perspective.

PRACTICING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FLEXIBILITY

What is intercultural communication flexibility? How do we know that the individuals in the communication process have communicated inflexibly or flexibly? Intercultural communication flexibility has three content components—knowledge, attitude, and skills. **Flexible intercultural communication** emphasizes the importance of integrating knowledge and an open-minded attitude and putting them into adaptive and creative practice in everyday communication. **Inflexible intercultural communication** stresses the continuation of using our own cultural values, judgments, and routines in communicating with culturally different others.

Whereas inflexible intercultural communication reflects an ethnocentric mindset, flexible intercultural communication reflects an ethnorelative attitude. An **ethnocentric mindset** means staying stuck with our own cultural worldviews and using our own cultural values as the baseline standards to evaluate the other person's cultural behavior. An **ethnorelative mindset,** however, means to understand a communication behavior from the other person's cultural frame of reference (M. Bennett, 1993; J. Bennett & M. Bennett, 2004). In an optimal state of ethnorelativism, a flexible mindset, an alert emotional awareness, and competent interaction behaviors come together and help us to become dynamic, flexible intercultural communicators. In the following sections, we first discuss the three components of flexible intercultural communication. We then discuss the three criteria for evaluating whether the cultural members in the process have behaved flexibly or inflexibly.

Three Content Components: Knowledge, Attitude, and Skills

Knowledge here refers to the systematic, conscious learning of the essential themes and concepts in intercultural communication flexibility. Conscious learning can be developed through formal studying and

informal immersion experiences. *Formal studying* can include taking classes in intercultural communication and ethnic-related studies. It includes attending intercultural communication seminars and diversity-related training. It could mean taking a foreign language class or a global history class. *Informal learning* experiences can include international traveling, studying abroad, volunteering for community service, and visiting ethnic neighborhoods, temples, or stores in our own backyard. It includes reading international newspapers and magazines. It could mean putting ourselves in constant contact with culturally different others and learning to be comfortable with the differences.

To digest the knowledge we have learned, we must develop an open mindset and an attentive heart. **Attitude** can include both cognitive and affective layers. The *cognitive* layer refers to the willingness to suspend our ethnocentric judgment and readiness to be open-minded in learning about cross-cultural difference issues. The *affective* layer refers to the emotional commitment to engage in cultural perspective-taking and the cultivation of an empathetic heart in reaching out to culturally diverse groups. It also means we have spent time reflecting on our own identity and emotional vulnerability issues in dealing with the changes within our own affective state. A receptive and responsive attitude serves as the basis to push us forward to communicate adaptively with people from diverse cultural communities.

In developing cognitive and affective openness, we try to intentionally put on a new pair of "glasses" or "lenses" (i.e., the practice of ethnorelative thinking and empathy). A flexible intercultural attitude means engaging in ethnorelative thinking to understand someone else's behavior from her or his cultural point of view. From an ethnorelative lens, we put our ethnocentrism on hold and suspend our hasty cultural judgments.

Skills are our operational abilities to integrate knowledge and a responsive attitude with adaptive intercultural practice. Adaptive communication skills help us to communicate mindfully in an intercultural situation. Many interaction skills are useful in promoting flexible intercultural communication. Some of these, for example, are value clarification skills, mindful tracking skills, attentive listening, verbal code switching, nonverbal sensitivity skills, and intercultural conflict management tools (see the Intercultural Reality Check section at the end of this and each of the remaining chapters). These skills will be discussed under different topics in later chapters.

Three Criteria: Appropriateness, Effectiveness, and Adaptability

The criteria of communication appropriateness, effectiveness, adaptability, and creativity can serve as evaluative yardsticks of whether an intercultural communicator has been perceived as behaving flexibly or inflexibly (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2004, 2010c) in an interaction episode. A dynamic, competent intercultural communicator is one who manages multiple meanings in the communication exchange process—appropriately, effectively, and adaptively. All three criteria can also be applied developmentally to an individual who is attempting to increase her or his mastery of knowledge, an open attitude, and skills in dealing constructively with members of diverse cultures (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Wiseman, 2003).

Appropriateness refers to the degree to which the exchanged behaviors are regarded as proper and match the expectations generated by the insiders of the culture. Individuals typically use their own cultural expectations and scripts to approach an intercultural interaction scene. They also formulate their impressions of a competent communicator on the basis of their perceptions of the other's verbal and nonverbal behaviors in the particular interaction setting. The first lesson in communication competence is to "tune in" to our own ethnocentric evaluations concerning "improper" dissimilar behaviors. Our evaluations of "proper" and "improper" behavior stem, in part, from our ingrained cultural socialization experiences. If your friend has never eaten with a knife and fork, this does not mean your friend lacks good manners. Perhaps your friend eats with chopsticks, hands, a spoon, or a combination of these.

To understand whether appropriate communication has been perceived, it is vital to obtain competence evaluations from the standpoint of both communicators and interested observers. It is also

critical to obtain both self-perception and other-perception data. We may think that we are acting appropriately, but others may not concur with our self-assessment. Appropriate communication behaviors can be assessed through understanding the underlying values, norms, social roles, expectations, and scripts that govern the interaction episode. When we act appropriately in an interaction scene, our culturally proper behaviors can facilitate communication effectiveness. Instead of saying to your friend, "You're so weird!" you may ask him if he can teach you how to use a pair of chopsticks.

Effectiveness refers to the degree to which communicators achieve mutually shared meaning and integrative goal-related outcomes. Effective encoding and decoding processes lead to mutually shared meanings. Mutually shared meanings lead to perceived intercultural understanding. Interaction effectiveness has been achieved when multiple meanings are attended to with accuracy and when mutually desired interaction goals have been reached. Interaction ineffectiveness occurs when interpersonal goals are mismatched and intercultural noises and clashes jam the communication channels (Gudykunst, 2001, 2005a, 2005b).

Communication effectiveness can improve task productivity. Productivity is closely related to outcome factors, such as the generation of new ideas, new plans, new momentum, and creative directions in resolving the intercultural problem. In an unproductive interaction episode, both sides feel that they have wasted their time and energy in being involved in the interaction in the first place. Both sides feel they have lost sight of their original goals in the stressful interaction episode. In a productive communication exchange, both sides feel that they have mutual influence over the communication process and that they have devoted positive energy in creating the constructive outcome.

Communication adaptability refers to our ability to change our interaction behaviors and goals to meet the specific needs of the situation. It implies behavioral flexibility in dealing with the intercultural miscommunication episode. It signals our mindful awareness of the other person's perspectives, interests, goals, and communication approach, plus our willingness to modify our own behaviors and goals to adapt to the interaction situation. By mindfully tracking what is going on in the intercultural situation, both parties may modify their nonverbal and verbal behavior to achieve a more synchronized communication process. In modifying their behavioral styles, polarized views on the intercultural content problem may also become depolarized or "softened."

Flexible intercultural communication requires us to communicate appropriately and effectively in different intercultural situations, which necessitates creativity, choices, change, and adaptation (Digh, 2008, 2011; Iyengar, 2010; Tharp & Reiter, 2003). By having an open-minded attitude that motivates our behaviors, we generate intercultural interest and curiosity in the intercultural relating process (Gannon & Pillai, 2010; Nwosu, 2009; Van Dyne, Ang, & Koh, 2009).

In sum, to be flexible intercultural communicators, we must be highly imaginative in our assessment of the intercultural contact situation. We also must be behaviorally nimble to decide whether to adapt, to maintain the same posture, or to expect the other person to adapt to our behaviors—depending upon the intentions, process, goals, and people involved in the interactive situation. It takes a flexible mindset to combine the best practices of both cultures to arrive at a creative, synergistic solution (Schaetti, Ramsey, & Watanabe, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 2009). It also takes a well-balanced heart to move beyond the practices of both cultures and utilize a third-culture approach to sensitively bridge the cultural differences. An individual with an open mindset and elastic communication skills is able to flex her or his communication muscles with good timing and can stretch intentionally to interact competently through a diverse range of intercultural terrains.

DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FLEXIBILITY

To understand intercultural communication flexibility from a long-term developmental viewpoint, we present the staircase model to reinforce your learning and stretch your imagination.

A Staircase Model

Flexible intercultural communication can be conceptualized along the following stages (see Figure 2.2): (1) unconscious incompetence—the blissfully ignorant
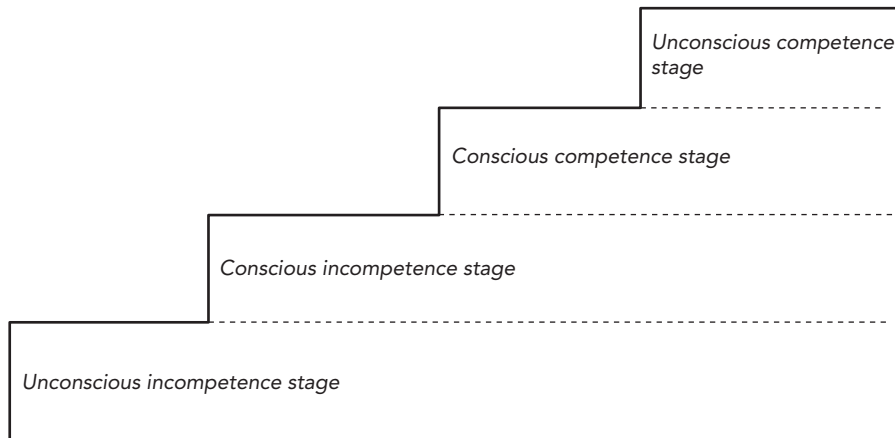
Unconscious competence stage

Conscious competence stage

Conscious incompetence stage

Unconscious incompetence stage

FIGURE 2.2   Intercultural Communication Competence: A Staircase Model

stage in which an individual is unaware of the communication blunders she has committed in interacting with a cultural stranger; (2) conscious incompetence—the semi-awareness stage in which an individual is aware of her incompetence in communicating with members of the new culture but does not do anything (or know how to) to change her behavior adaptively in the new cultural situation; (3) conscious competence—the "**full mindfulness**" stage when an individual is aware of her intercultural communication "nonfluency" and is committed to integrating the new knowledge, attitude, and skills into competent practice; and (4) unconscious competence—the "mindlessly mindful" zen stage when an individual can code switch so spontaneously and effortlessly that the interaction flows smoothly from an "out-of-conscious yet mindful awareness" rhythm (Howell, 1982; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

In the first stage, the **unconscious incompetence stage,** individuals have no culture-sensitive knowledge (nor do they have responsive attitudes or skills) to communicate competently with the host members of the new culture (see Blog Pic 2.1). This is the cultural obliviousness stage or cultural ignorance stage. Cultural members operate from a total ethnocentric worldview. For example, Esteban, who is Cuban American, likes to tell racial jokes about Cubans. Because he is Cuban American, he thinks it is totally acceptable to joke about his own ethnic ingroup. However, some of

his Cuban and non-Cuban friends do not appreciate the jokes at all. They send him nonverbal disapproval signals but he does not get those awkward signals.

In the second stage, the **conscious incompetence stage,** individuals have some notion (i.e., attitudinal openness) that they behave incompetently; however, they lack the knowledge or skills to operate appropriately in the new cultural setting. They do, however, start questioning their own ethnocentric lens and communication habits. For example, Estaban still admits to telling racial jokes out of habit—although he is aware of his terribly offensive behavior.

In the third stage, the **conscious competence stage,** individuals are actively pursuing new intercultural knowledge to improve their communication competencies. Given time and practice, they would probably move from the conscious semicompetence phase to the conscious full-competence phase. In the fully developed conscious competence phase, individuals are able to connect knowledge, a responsive attitude, and skills into competent applications. In the conscious competence stage, individuals try to stay in tune and be fully mindful of the communication process itself and also attend to the outcome goal. They use an ethnorelative lens, rather than an ethnocentric lens, in interpreting what is going on in the intercultural encounter process.

For example, if we decide to spend time in Spain, we must learn new behaviors conscientiously, from "*el*

punto del sal" (a Spanish custom that says one should not add salt to a meal until after tasting it, because it shows you doubt the competency of the chef; the food should arrive at the table with the correct amount of salt) to "always wear shoes or slippers inside the house" (bare or stocking feet are unseemly and improper, according to the Spanish culture). Becoming consciously competent can allow you to pick up everyday intercultural meanings and also practice competent intercultural behaviors.

The fourth stage, the **unconscious competence stage**, is the "mindlessly mindful" zen-like stage in which individuals move in and out of spontaneous yet adaptive communication with members of the new culture. They can code switch effortlessly between the two different intercultural communication systems. Their effort appears to be very "seamless"—thus, the notion of "unconscious" competence. For example, once a person becomes conscious of the Spanish custom of always wearing shoes inside a Spanish house, with repeated practice it becomes a spontaneous habit—done without awareness. However, if the same person now travels to Japan, she must learn new rules of behaving (e.g., taking off her shoes before entering a traditional Japanese house and putting on a pair of nice, clean guest slippers). Thus, in any intercultural situation, the most flexible intercultural communicators often rotate between the conscious competence stage and the unconscious competence stage. Through such rotation between stages, the flexible intercultural communicator is constantly updating her knowledge about cultural difference issues and refreshing her attitude in dealing with culturally diverse situations (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1998, 2009).

If an individual stays in the unconscious competence stage for too long without a humble attitude, cultural arrogance may set in without notice. The individual may easily fall back into the unconscious incompetence stage because of overconfidence or cultural condescension (see Blog Pic 2.2).

An Essential Hook: A Mindful Perspective

Communication flexibility requires us to be sensitive to the differences and similarities between dissimilar cultures. It also demands that we be aware of our own ethnocentric biases when making evaluations
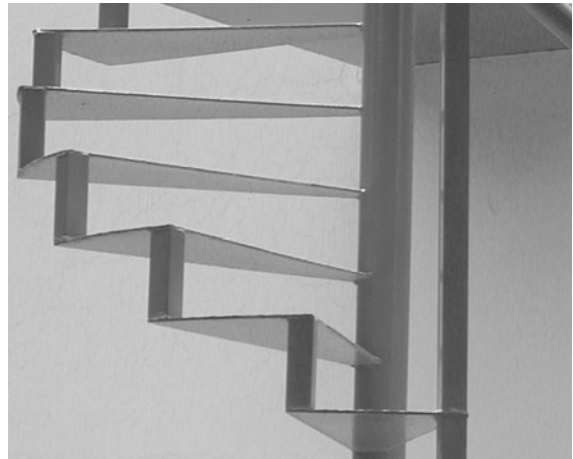
Blog Pic 2.2   Where do you envision yourself on these stairs?

of other people's communication approaches. It also asks us to communicate appropriately, effectively, and adaptively in a culturally respectful manner. A flexible communicator is a well-trained individual with a vast amount of knowledge in the domain of intercultural communication. He is able to make creative connections among cultural values, communication styles, and situational issues.

A flexible communicator is also a mindful cultural scanner (Ting-Toomey 2009, 2010a). To engage in an inward state of mindfulness, an individual must turn inward and look into herself and realize that: (1) her state of identity is closely intertwined with her unconscious cultural conditioning process; (2) her reactive judgments of culturally unfamiliar behaviors are based on her own cultural and personal value priorities; (3) her perceptions and interpretations of culturally "bizarre" behaviors are often based on the insecure feelings of fear and colored by stereotypic images gained from the media; and (4) her lack of knowledge about the unfamiliar others creates further psychological and physical gaps (Ting-Toomey, 2010a).

In addition, to engage in an outward state of mindfulness, a flexible intercultural communicator must learn to: (1) engage in cultural frame switching and see things from the other person's cultural frame of values; (2) connect underlying value patterns with the unfamiliar cultural behaviors and understand

the cultural logic of why people behave the way they behave; (3) observe and notice complexity of identity issues and situational issues in any cultural community; and (4) focus on the present moment of the process and listen closely to the repeated words and nonverbal nuances that are being exchanged in the process (Bennett-Goleman, 2001; Canary & Lakey, 2006; Langer, 1989, 1997; Ting-Toomey, 2009).

To be flexible intercultural communicators, we must increase the complexity of our intercultural communication knowledge. We must develop a keen sense of alertness on two fronts—one is increasing self-awareness as a cultural and unique being and the other is increasing our awareness of others as complex cultural and unique beings. Furthermore, we must develop a more layered sense of understanding by realizing that many cultural, ethnic, situational, and personal factors shape and, in turn, affect an intercultural miscommunication episode. Being committed to applying divergent and differentiated cultural viewpoints means taking the time and patience to work out the cultural differences constructively. We will lay out some of these ideas in the coming chapters.

DEEPENING INTERCULTURAL PROCESS THINKING

The general goal of intercultural communication is to create shared meanings competently—so that what I intended to say or imply is accurately decoded by the culturally different other and, simultaneously, in a culturally appropriate manner. To communicate effectively and appropriately, a flexible intercultural communicator must develop a keen sense of adaptability and imagination in her or his intercultural connecting process.

Process Consciousness: Underlying Principles

The following guidelines are presented to increase your conceptual understanding of the intercultural communication process. On an everyday intercultural communication level, we must develop an astute sense of mindfulness of the following principles:

PRINCIPLE 1: *Intercultural communication often involves mismatched expectations that stem, in part, from cultural group membership differences.* When we encounter miscommunication in an intercultural interaction process, we experience emotional frustration. Some of the emotional frustration often stems, in part, from cultural differences, mismatched expectations, or ignorance. Intercultural miscommunication takes place when our cultural group membership factors affect, in part, our communication process on either an awareness or an unawareness level.

The cultural membership differences can include deep-level differences, such as cultural worldview differences and value differences. Concurrently, they can also include the mismatch of applying different norms and expectations in a particular communication scene. In practicing mindful intercultural communication, we can develop an understanding of the valuable differences that exist between different cultural groups. At the same time, we also must continuously recognize the commonalities that exist in all humans, across all cultures.

PRINCIPLE 2: *Intercultural communication often involves varying degrees of biased intergroup perceptions.* Biased intergroup perceptions often involve overgeneralizations or stereotypes. The term *intergroup* means viewing the person as a representation of a group membership category and deemphasizing the person's unique attributes. Thus, from an intergroup lens, stereotyping involves an overestimation of the degree of association between stereotypic–psychological traits (e.g., cantankerous, grumpy) and group membership categories (e.g., elderly population). Moreover, stereotyping is also about creating self-fulfilling prophecies. We tend to see behavior that confirms our expectations even when it is absent, and we ignore vital information (e.g., knowledgeable, wise advice) when it is incongruous with our expectations.

When we communicate mindlessly, we do not notice the distinctive qualities of the cultural person with whom we are communicating. Rather, we fall back on our stereotypes to reduce our guesswork and, perhaps, emotional vulnerability level. Although the contents of our stereotypes can be positive or negative, rigidly typecasting selective members of a cultural

group into "triangles" and "squares" can perpetuate inaccurate impressions and myths. If we are unwilling to question our rigidly held stereotypes, our intergroup relationships will stay only at a superficial level of contact. Stereotyping, together with an ethnocentric attitude and a prejudiced mindset, can often perpetuate misinterpretation spirals and intergroup conflict cycles.

PRINCIPLE 3: *Intercultural communication involves the simultaneous encoding and decoding of verbal and nonverbal messages in the exchange process.* This is the key assumption to understanding the concept of "process" in intercultural communication. From a transactional model viewpoint, both intercultural communicators in the communication process are viewed as playing the sender and receiver roles. Both are responsible for synchronizing the conversational process and outcome. An effective encoding and decoding process leads to shared meanings. An ineffective encoding and decoding process by one of the two "transceivers" can lead to intercultural misunderstanding.

However, beyond the accurate encoding and decoding of messages on the content level, communicators need to cultivate additional sensitivity along multiple levels (such as relational, identity, and situational meanings) of intercultural understanding. Without a keen sense of cultural decoding competence, we

Blog Pic 2.3   Intercultural incompetence.

are likely to misjudge our intercultural partners' intentions and find ourselves in serious trouble. Without a mindful sense of message encoding, we may say the wrong things in the wrong context and with bad timing. With mindful alertness, we can conscientiously choose words and behaviors that make dissimilar others feel affirmed, included, and listened to.

PRINCIPLE 4: *Intercultural communication involves multiple goals, and the goals people have are largely dependent on how they define the interaction episode.* Echoing the various layers of meaning negotiation, three types of goals are important in an intercultural encounter process: content goals, relational goals, and identity goals. *Content goals* refer to external, substantive issues in the communication process. Some questions we may want to consider are these: What do we want to accomplish in the intercultural negotiation session? What are the content or instrumental interaction goals? What are the potential obstacles and the necessary steps to accomplish our goals effectively? For example, a clear content goal discussion can involve asking a professor to postpone the deadline of a group project or requesting a pay raise from your international boss. We need to think ahead in terms of the cultural or interpersonal obstacles that lie in the path of content goal attainment. We also need to decide whether we should pursue our content goals in an individualistic, assertive manner or in a relational, tactful manner.

Relational goals refer to the socioemotional issues or relational role expectations that are involved in the intercultural negotiation session. We need to examine questions such as the following: What are my role expectations and the other person's role expectations in the intercultural encounter episode? What are the situational conditions that shape the dynamics of the role-encountering process? What are the behavioral requirements, and what is "off limits" in this intercultural interaction scene? A professor from a small power distance value culture (e.g., the United States) may be comfortable with informal discussions with his students in the classroom environment. A professor from a large power distance value culture (e.g., Iran) may expect more formality from students in the classroom setting. However, the same Iranian professor may relax her role expectations at a student-sponsored picnic in the park. To be flexible com-

municators across cultural lines, we must recognize the interconnected nature of norms, roles, and situations.

Identity goals refer to the projected self-image or self-worth issues in the interaction scene. Identity goals can involve identity respect/disrespect or approval/disapproval postures. It can also be interpreted in connection with our desires to have our cultural, ethnic, gender, disability, professional, and personal images respected in the communication episode. The ability to project a desired self-image or "face" and to have this projected "face" be validated are critical skills in any intercultural negotiation session. *Face* is basically about identity respect issues and other consideration issues within and beyond the intercultural encounter process. In a mindful facework negotiation process, honoring others' face and helping others to save face are ways to manage favorable interactive identities across cultures (see Blog Post 2.1).

PRINCIPLE 5: *Intercultural communication calls for understanding and acceptance of diverse communication approaches and styles.* For example, in an intercultural conflict episode, parties often utilize different communication styles that are consistent with their culture-based values. For some cultures, a conflict with another party should be confronted directly and assertive steps should be taken to resolve the conflict in a clear win–lose direction. In other cultures, a conflict should be avoided at all costs to preserve relational harmony. Mutual face-saving and face-honoring moves may supersede the need to arrive at a clear win–lose

resolution. In fact, conflict negotiators may want to cultivate the image of a win–win conflict process so that both parties can maintain some face, or dignity, before returning to their home cultures.

The cultural preferences for certain communication styles are, of course, mediated by many situational and relationship expectation factors. To embark on an inclusive communication approach, we must learn to be flexible in our verbal and nonverbal styles in dealing with diverse groups. We also must pay close attention to mediating factors—such as situational parameters and interaction goals—in shaping our different communication modes.

PRINCIPLE 6: *Many intercultural encounters involve well-meaning culture bumps or clashes.* Individuals of different cultural communities have learned different interaction forms, for example, eye contact maintenance or avoidance, in everyday conversations. They also tend to use their own cultural scripts to evaluate the competencies of cultural strangers' behaviors. Many intercultural miscommunication episodes start off from culture bumps or clashes. A **culture bump** is defined as a cultural violation on the behavioral level when our meanings do not overlap with one another in viewing the same behavior, which creates communication awkwardness or embarrassment (Archer, 1991). Let us look at Blog Post 2.2.

In this particular story, although David acted in an "unconscious incompetent" manner in the beginning, he caught his own culture bump and moved to the

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BLOG POST 2.1

As a Mexican American young woman, I've experienced the push and pull of my identity. I feel like half of my life I've been adopting and adapting to the dominant American culture while selectively choosing certain aspects of my Mexican culture to nurture and celebrate.

Growing up, I did not interact much with other Hispanic classmates. In fact, I didn't know how to talk to them. I was constantly surrounded by Caucasians and determined at that time in my young life that this was how everything should be. This was the time that I began to disregard my Hispanic identity. I remember acting aloof when my mother attempted to speak Spanish and I pretended I didn't understand her. Soon thereafter, I remember seeing gardeners (who are stereotypically Mexican

in Southern California) and thinking to myself, I may be Mexican, but I'm not a gardener.

It wasn't until college that I was exposed to the reality of social circumstances, prejudice, stereotypes, and heteronormativity. I realized then how empty my identity had become and how rich it could be with a reacquaintance of my Mexican roots. Yes, I will take up anything and everything that is related to being Hispanic as part of my identity now, it is who I am. To not embrace my Mexican heritage is to not embrace me. I guess that's why I favor diversity in the schools I've attended, and I now have a better perspective on what I want my life to be like as I raise my children up in a world where every ethnicity should be welcomed.

—Jennifer, *college student*

BLOG POST 2.2

In a Poly Sci[ence] class during a group discussion, I was sitting to the right of a man from Saudi Arabia. As I was talking to him, I placed my right ankle on my left knee. I noticed a definite change in his demeanor toward me. After class, I approached him and asked if I had done or said something that offended him. He told me that in the Arab culture, exposing the soles of your shoes while directly speaking to someone is tantamount to giving them "the finger." I apologized for my ignorance; he apologized for his ignorance of my ignorance. We ended up being friendly to one another for the remainder of the semester.

—David, *college student*

"conscious incompetent" stage to inquire about his own communication mistake. A culture bump often ends in more miscommunications and frustration when the two communicators continue to misinterpret each other's behavior as rude or even insulting. A culture bump is about violating another person's cultural norms without malicious intent. More often than not, we commit unintentional culture bumps in a new culture because we have not mastered the norms and the meaning fluency of that new system.

Well-meaning clash basically refers to misunderstanding an encounter in which people are actually behaving in a "socially skilled manner" and with "good intentions" according to the norms in their own culture (Brislin, 1993). Unfortunately, the behaviors that are considered proper or effective in one culture can be considered improper or ineffective in another culture. For example, using direct eye contact is considered a sign of respect in U.S. culture, whereas direct eye contact can signify disrespect in the Thai culture. The term *well-meaning* is used because no one in the intercultural encounter intentionally behaves obnoxiously or unpleasantly. Individuals are trying to be well mannered or pleasant in accordance with the politeness norms of their own culture. Individuals behave ethnocentrically—often without conscious realization of their automatic-pilot verbal or nonverbal routines.

PRINCIPLE 7: *Intercultural communication always takes place in a context.* Intercultural communication does not happen in a vacuum, but is always context bound. Patterns of thinking and behaving are always interpreted within an interactive situation or context. To understand intercultural communication from a contextual viewpoint, we must consider how the physical and psychological settings of the communicators establish the climate or mood of their interaction.

The physical setting can include furniture arrangement, props, color of the room, temperature of the room, and who is in the room. However, and more important, we must understand the psychological or emotional meanings that are attached to the physical setting by the different cultural participants. Additionally, the expected roles of the participants, their relational distance, conversational topics, interaction goals, implicit communication rules, and culture shock factors can all influence the interaction climate. Last, the degree of cultural knowledge, past cultural visiting experience, and competent performance of communication skills form the overall patterns of the communication context.

PRINCIPLE 8: *Intercultural communication always takes place in embedded systems.* A system is an interdependent set of components that constitutes a whole and, simultaneously, influence each other. Our enculturation process (i.e., our primary socialization process at a young age) is influenced by both macro- and microlevel events in our cultural environment. On a macro level, we are programmed or enculturated into our culture via our family and educational systems, religious and political systems, and government and socioeconomic systems, as well as by the paramount influence of media in our everyday life (Oetzel, 2009; Oetzel et al., 2006).

On a microlevel, we are surrounded by people who subscribe to similar worldviews, values, norms, and expectations. We are the recipients and also the preservers of our culture via the daily messages that we trade. However, culture is not a static web. It is a dynamic, evolutionary process. Human beings are also not static individuals—they are changeable. In learning about another culture or dissimilar groups, we can expand our mental landscape and emotional horizon. Through

the lens of another culture, we may be able to reinterpret our own identity and culture with fresh visions and insights.

INTERCULTURAL REALITY CHECK: DO-ABLES

In this chapter, we defined intercultural communication and intercultural communication flexibility. In exploring the definition of intercultural communication, we emphasized the importance of using a meaning-centered approach to look at the intercultural communication process. We also covered the components and criteria of intercultural communication flexibility. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of a staircase learning model—from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence—and the role of mindfulness in achieving intercultural communication flexibility.

To be a dynamic, flexible intercultural communicator, you must start practicing some of the ideas you have read in this chapter in your everyday intercultural encounters. Let the learning journey begin. We also urge you to develop a strong "process consciousness" in dealing with cultural strangers. More specifically, we would like you to build on what you've learned so far, keeping the following checkpoints in mind when, in the next chapter, you learn about the value dimensions of a culture:

- A flexible intercultural communicator emphasizes a process-focused approach to intercultural communication.
- A flexible intercultural communicator recognizes the separate, ethnocentric realities that divide individuals and groups.
- A flexible intercultural communicator is willing to suspend evaluative, snap judgments concerning culture-based verbal and nonverbal style differences.
- A flexible intercultural communicator can deal with ambiguities and paradoxes in uncertain intercultural situations.
- A flexible intercultural communicator can communicate appropriately, effectively, adaptively, and creatively through the use of a variety of constructive verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

Intercultural knowledge opens doors to the diverse richness and breadth of the human experience. It reveals to us multiple ways of experiencing, sensing, feeling, and knowing. It helps us to start questioning our own stance regarding issues that we once took for granted. It widens our vision to include an alternative perspective of valuing and relating. By understanding the worldviews and values that influence others' communication approaches, we can understand the logic that motivates and propels their actions or behaviors. The next chapter will discuss some key value patterns around the globe.