

**T**he more we learn about the ways people differ, the more we understand that a great deal of our everyday communication is actually "intercultural." For example, communication scholar and best-selling author Deborah Tannen makes a convincing argument that men and women constitute distinct cultures, so that the best way to approach each instance of male-female communication is to realize that you're in an *intercultural* situation. Especially in the United States, peoples' ethnic awareness is increasing, which means that individuals want to be recognized as members of distinct cultures—African-American, Taiwanese, handicapped, Puerto Rican, Laotian, or gay, for example. Regardless of your own cultural identity, it can become more and more difficult to know how to deal with all the diversity.

Bill Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim are two speech communication teachers and researchers who have devoted their careers to studying intercultural communication. In the following pages they lay out a basic approach to intercultural communication that is broad enough to apply not only to U.S.-Japanese and Canadian-Mexican contacts, but also to encounters between African Americans and Asian Americans, Laotian refugees and Caucasian bureaucrats, heterosexuals and lesbian women, and "a new bride visiting the groom's family."

There are two keys to this breadth. The first is the idea that "culture is communication and communication is culture." In other words, verbal and nonverbal communicating is the place where the "culture" rubber hits the road. Cultural abstractions become concrete in communication behaviors. The second key is the concept of "the stranger," which can be used to talk about "aliens, intruders, foreigners, outsiders, newcomers, and immigrants, as well as any person who is unknown and unfamiliar." When we encounter someone we define as "stranger," we experience some predictable difficulties and tend to respond in some predictable ways. Gudykunst and Kim outline these tendencies and suggest how we can become aware of them, and when it's desirable, change them.

First we can recognize the three levels of data that people use in making predictions about others—cultural, sociological, and psychological. When we mainly notice cultural data, the dangers are that we are unaware of the complexity of other persons' cultural experiences and/or that we interpret what they do *ethnocentrically*, that is, as if only our own culture knows how to "do things right." When we base our predictions on sociological, or group membership information, we often overlook the number of groups a stranger may belong to and misinterpret which group's norms and values are influencing them. When we base predictions on psychological data, we take into consideration each other person's individual differences. Since all three levels of data involve some cultural information, Gudykunst and Kim rename them "cultural," "sociocultural," and "psychocultural."

When we make inferences on the basis of the first two levels of data—cultural and sociocultural—we engage in categorization that can become stereotyping. Unfortunately, many of these categorizing processes are also "mindless," which means that they operate below our level of awareness. One way to become a more effective intercultural communicator is to move from what these authors call mindless "unconscious incompetence" through "conscious incompetence" and "conscious competence" to "unconscious competence."

The best way to begin making this set of moves is to learn how to reduce our uncertainty about the strangers we encounter. Gudykunst and Kim discuss three general sets of uncertainty reduction strategies—passive ones, active ones, and interactive ones. They illustrate how these operate in an example using Hiroko, a Japanese you've just been introduced to.

Anxiety is another barrier to intercultural communication that these authors discuss. They explain where it comes from and suggest how to cope with it. Then Gudykunst and Kim explain some of the attributional processes that occur in intercultural contacts—how the people involved make attributions based on each other's behavior. This section is useful because it illustrates the choices we have. We don't have to jump to the conclusion, for example, that what we hear as an insult is grounded in hostility.

This reading provides a general way to think about the many intercultural contacts you experience every day. It also suggests some initial ways to deal with the problems you might encounter. The following readings develop many of the suggestions made here.

## **Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication**

**William B. Gudykunst and  
Young Yun Kim**

*Greetings. I am pleased to see that we are different. May we together become greater than the sum of both of us.*

VULCAN GREETING (STAR TREK)

In the past most human beings were born, lived, and died within a limited geographical area, never encountering people of other faces and/or cultural backgrounds. Such an existence, however, no longer prevails in the world. Even members of once isolated groups of people like the Tasadays in the Philippines now frequently have contact with members of other cultural groups. McLuhan (1962) characterized today's world as a "global village" because of the rapid expansion of worldwide transportation and communication networks (e.g., airplanes, communication satellites, and telephones). It is now possible for any person from an industrialized country to communicate with any person in another industrialized country within minutes by phone or within hours face-to-face. In fact, we are at a point in history when important or interesting events (wars, U.S. presidential debates, major sporting events, royal weddings,

and so forth) in one country are often transmitted simultaneously to more than different countries. . . .

In a world of international interdependence, the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from other cultures takes on extreme urgency. The need for intercultural understanding, however, does not begin or end with national boundaries. Within any nation a multitude of racial and ethnic groups exist, and their members interact daily. Legislation and legal rulings in the United States on affirmative action, school busing, and desegregation underscore the importance of non-discriminatory contact between members of different racial and ethnic groups. The importance of good intergroup relations also is apparent when current demographic trends are examined. It is projected, for example, that in the near future the workplace will change from a place dominated by white males to a place dominated by women, immigrants, and nonwhite ethnics (Hudson Institute, 1987). For work to be accomplished effectively in the multicultural organization, people of different racial and ethnic groups need to understand one another's cultures and patterns of communication.

It is recognized widely that one of the characteristics separating humans from other animals is our development of culture. The development of human culture was made possible through communication, and it is through communication that culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Culture and communication are intertwined so closely that Hall (1959) maintains that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." In other words, we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms. Because we learn the language, rules, and norms of our culture by a very early age (between five and ten years old), however, we generally are unaware of how culture influences our behavior in general and our communication in particular.

When we communicate with people from other cultures, we often are confronted with languages, rules, and norms different from our own. Confronting these differences can be a source of insight into the rules and norms of our own culture, as well as be a source of frustration or gratification. Although the presence of cultural differences may suggest the need for accommodation in our communication, it cannot be taken automatically as either a barrier or a facilitator of effective communication (Ellingsworth, 1977). Communication between people from different cultures can be as effective as communication between people from the same culture (Taylor Simard, 1975). Stated in another way, communicating with a person from another culture may be either easier or more difficult than communicating with someone from the same culture.

One of the major factors influencing our effectiveness in communicating with people from other cultures is our ability to understand their culture. It is impossible to understand the communication of people from other cultures if we are highly ethnocentric. Sumner (1940) characterizes ethnocentrism as the "view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (p. 27). Ethnocentrism leads us to see our own culture's way of doing things as "right" and all others as "wrong." While the tendency to make judgments according to our own cultural standards is natural, it hinders our understanding of other cultures and the patterns of communication of their people. Becoming more culturally relativistic, on the other hand, can be conducive to understanding.

Cultural relativism suggests that the only way we can understand the behavior of others is in the context of their culture. Herskovits (1973) succinctly summarizes this position when he says evaluations must be "relative to the cultural background out of which they arise" (p. 14). No one cultural trait is "right" or "wrong"; it is merely "c

erent" from alternative cultural traits. This is not to say we must never make value judgments of people in other cultures. Making them is often necessary. . . . Postponing these value judgments, or recognizing their tentative nature, until adequate information is gathered and we understand the people from the other culture, however, greatly facilitates understanding and effective communication. . . .

## An Approach to the Study of Intercultural Communication

*See at a distance an undesirable person;  
See close at hand a desirable person;  
Come closer to the undesirable person;  
Move away from the desirable person.  
Coming close and moving apart,  
how interesting life is.*

GENSHO OGURA

It commonly is accepted that cultural variability in people's backgrounds influences their communication behavior. This "fact" leads many scholars studying intercultural communication to view it as a unique form of communication, differing in kind from other forms of communication (e.g., communication between people from the same culture). This point of view, however, is not accepted widely. Sarbaugh (1979) points out that

there appears to be a temptation among scholars and practitioners of communication to approach intercultural communication as though it were a different process than intracultural communication. As one begins to identify the variables that operate in the communication being studied, however, it becomes apparent that they are the same for both intracultural and intercultural settings. (p. 5)

We agree with Sarbaugh; not only are the variables the same, but the underlying communication process is also the same.

We believe that any approach to the study of intercultural communication must be consistent with the study of intracultural communication. In this chapter . . . we lay out a perspective for the study of communication that is useful not only for understanding our communication with people from other cultures or subcultures but also for understanding our communication with people from our own culture or subculture. We first turn our attention to the linking concept in our view of communication—the concept of the stranger as a social phenomenon.

## The Concept of the Stranger

To understand communication between people from different cultures, it is necessary to recognize that when people are confronted with cultural differences (and other forms of group differences, such as racial, ethnic, or class differences), they tend to view people from the group that is different as strangers. The term *stranger* is somewhat ambiguous in that it is often used to refer to aliens, intruders, foreigners, outsiders, newcomers, and immigrants, as well as any person who is unknown and unfamiliar. Despite this ambiguity "the concept of the stranger remains one of the most powerful

sociological tools for analyzing social processes of individuals and groups confront new social orders" (Shack, 1979, p. 2). . . .

Strangers do not have the knowledge necessary to fully understand their environment or the communication of the people who live in it. Further, members of the host group do not possess information regarding individual strangers, even though they may have some information about the group or culture from which the stranger comes. Since we do not have information regarding individual strangers, our initial impression of them must be largely an abstract or categoric one (i.e., a stereotypical one). Strangers are classified on the basis of whatever information we can obtain. If the only information we have is their culture, we base our initial impression on this information. If we have additional information (e.g., their race, ethnicity, gender, class), we use that as well.

Strangers, as we conceive of them, are people who are different and unknown and have come in contact with our group for the first time. It should be obvious that strangerhood is a figure-ground phenomenon—a stranger's status is always defined in relation to a host, a native, or some existing group. A person from the United States visiting another country and a person from another country visiting the United States, for example, are both strangers. A white teacher in a predominantly black school, a Native American working in a predominantly white organization, a Vietnamese refugee in the United States, a new bride visiting the groom's family, and a Chicano moving into a predominantly white neighborhood are all examples of strangers. In general, we include anyone entering a relatively unknown or unfamiliar environment under the rubric of stranger. . . .

Obviously, not everyone we meet for the first time is truly unknown and unfamiliar. Sometimes we are familiar with or know something about people we meet for the first time. Following Cohen (1972), we can say our social interactions, not just our interactions with people we meet for the first time, vary with respect to the degree of strangeness and/or familiarity present in the interaction. Our interactions with close friends and relatives involve a high degree of familiarity, while our interactions with acquaintances and coworkers involve less familiarity and more strangeness. When we meet people for the first time, there may be any degree of strangeness and/or familiarity. When we meet a close friend of our best friend for the first time, for example, we may be somewhat familiar with that person already. When we meet a person from another subculture of our culture (e.g., a person from another race or ethnic group), in contrast, our interaction with that person usually involves more strangeness than familiarity. Because they do not share the same culture, our interactions with people from other cultures often involve the highest degree of strangeness and the least degree of familiarity.

Our use of the term stranger . . . refers to those relationships where there is a relatively high degree of strangeness and a relatively low degree of familiarity. Since our interactions with people from other cultures tend to involve the highest degree of strangeness and the lowest degree of familiarity, we focus on these interactions, but we also examine other interactions involving a relatively high degree of strangeness (e.g., those with members of different races or ethnic groups).

In looking at the general process of communication with strangers, we are able to overcome one of the major conceptual problems of many analyses of intercultural communication. The problem to which we refer involves the drawing of artificial distinctions among intracultural, intercultural, interracial, and interethnic communication. While some variables may take on more importance in one situation than



another (e.g., our racial prejudices may be more important in interracial communication than in intraracial communication), each of the situations is influenced by the same variables (e.g., our prejudice also influences our intraracial communication, but it may be other prejudices, for example, sexism). If the variables influencing each situation and the underlying process of communication are the same, it does not make sense to draw artificial distinctions among them. By using the stranger as a linking concept, we can examine a general process, communicating with strangers, which subsumes intracultural, intercultural, interracial, and interethnic communication into one general framework.

## **An Overview of Communication With Strangers**

### ***Levels of Data Used in Making Predictions***

Whenever we communicate with strangers, we make predictions about the outcome of our communication behavior. Of course, we are not always aware of making these predictions. Our awareness of making predictions varies with the degree to which we are aware of alternative outcomes in a particular situation (Miller & Steinberg, 1975). If we are aware of alternative outcomes, we are more aware of making predictions about the effects of our behavior. When we communicate with strangers, we tend to be more aware of alternative outcomes than when we communicate with someone we know, or someone who is familiar.

Miller and Steinberg (1975) argue that we use three levels of data when we make predictions about other people's behavior. The first level of data we use is "cultural." The people in any culture generally behave in a regular fashion because of their postulates, norms, and values. It is this regularity that allows us to make predictions on the basis of cultural data. Miller and Sunnafrank (1982) point out that

knowledge about another person's culture—its language, dominant values, beliefs, and prevailing ideology—often permits predictions of the person's probable responses to certain messages. . . . Upon first encountering a stranger, cultural information provides the only grounds for communicative predictions. This fact explains the uneasiness and perceived lack of control most people experience when thrust into an alien culture: they not only lack information about the individuals with whom they must communicate, they are bereft of information concerning shared cultural norms and values. (pp. 226–227)

Two major factors influence our predictive accuracy using cultural data. First, the more experiences at the cultural level we have, the better our predictive accuracy is. When we are confronting someone from our own culture, the experiences to which we refer are in our culture. When we are communicating with strangers, on the other hand, our accuracy depends on our experiences with their culture. If we know little or nothing about the strangers' culture, our predictions will be less accurate than if we know a lot about their culture. Second, errors in predictions are made either because we are not aware of the strangers' cultural experiences or because we try to predict the behavior of strangers on the basis of cultural experiences different from the ones they have had—for example, when we make ethnocentric predictions on the basis of our own cultural experiences (Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

The second level of data used in making predictions is "sociological." Sociological level predictions are based on strangers' memberships in or aspirations to particular social groups. "Knowledge of an individual's membership groups, as well as the reference groups to which he or she aspires, permits numerous predictions about responses to various messages" (Miller & Sunnafrank, 1982, p. 227). Membership in social groups may be voluntary, or strangers may be classified as a member of a group because of certain characteristics they possess. Our predictions at the sociological level, for example, include those based on strangers' memberships in political or other social groups, the roles they fill, their gender, or their ethnicity. Miller and Sunnafrank (1982) argue that sociological level data are the principal kind used to predict the behavior of people from the same culture. The major error in making predictions using sociological level data stems from the fact that strangers are members of many groups and when we communicate with other people it is not always possible to be sure which group's norms and values are influencing their behavior (Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

The final level of data used in making predictions about the outcomes of communication behavior is "psychological." At the psychological level predictions are based on the specific people with whom we are communicating. At this level we are concerned with how these people are different from and similar to other members of their culture and the groups to which they belong. When predictions are based on psychological data, "each participant relates to the other in terms of what sets the other apart from most people. They take into consideration each other's individual differences in terms of the subject and the occasion" (Dance & Larson, 1972, p. 56).

It is important to keep in mind that our predictions are rarely made at only one level. Once we have some psychological information about a stranger with whom we are communicating, we use this information and combine it with our cultural and sociological data to make predictions about her or his behavior. Most of our predictions are some combination of the three levels of data, but one level often predominates.

For the purpose of the present analysis, we modify the labels for the three levels of data used in making predictions. Since all three levels are highly interrelated, we use labels reflecting the interrelations: cultural, sociocultural, and psychocultural. This modification of the last two labels is intended only to emphasize that the three levels of data are interrelated, not to reflect a disagreement with Miller and Steinberg (1975) conceptualization.

### ***Categorization and Particularization***

Making predictions based on cultural and/or sociocultural data can be likened to stimulus generalization, or looking for sameness when making predictions about other communicators, according to Miller and Steinberg (1975). They go on to point out that "stimulus generalization is closely akin to abstraction: One observes a group of objects and notes aspects they have in common. . . . Stimulus generalization necessarily ignores the characteristics on which objects and events differ" (p. 24). If predictions based on cultural and/or sociocultural data can be likened to stimulus generalization, then making predictions based on psychocultural data can be likened to stimulus discrimination, or looking for differences among communicators (Miller & Steinberg, 1975).

Stimulus generalization involves the process of categorization. Much of the work in social psychology on social cognition is based on the assumption that categorization is the fundamental process in thought. Cantor, Mischel, and Schwartz (1982), for example, contend that categorization is a fundamental quality of cognition. They

on to suggest that categorization is important because it allows "us to structure and give coherence to our general knowledge about people and the social world, providing expectations about typical patterns of behavior and the range of likely variation between types of people and their characteristic actions and attributes" (p. 34).

Billig (1987) does not deny that we engage in categorization, but he also believes that we engage in particularization. While categorization is the process whereby stimuli are placed in a general category, particularization is the process whereby stimuli are separated or differentiated from members of a category.

Billig contends that categorization and particularization are highly interrelated, 'so much so that the ability to categorize presupposes the ability to particularize' (p. 133). He points out that

the paradox is that these two processes seem to pull in opposite cognitive directions: the one pulls toward the aggregation of things and the other toward the uniqueness of things. The result is that the human mind is equipped with two contrary skills of being able to put things into categories and treat them as special. (p. 134).

Billig goes on to argue that "categorization does not provide the basis of thinking in a simple sense. The automatic application of categories is the negation of thinking, in that it is essentially a thoughtless process" (p. 140).

To summarize, anytime we communicate with strangers we engage in both categorization and particularization. Categorization, however, often predominates. When the process of categorization predominates we do not recognize strangers as individuals and communicate with them based on our stereotypes (i.e., the "pictures" of their groups we have in our heads) and attitudes toward their group. . . . Since our stereotypes often are inaccurate and/or do not apply to particular strangers, our predictions of their behavior often are inaccurate. This leads to misunderstandings and ineffective communication. To communicate effectively, we must be thoughtful and particularize incoming messages from strangers. That is, we must look closely at the unique attributes, attitudes, and behaviors of strangers before making predictions about them. We must be mindful.

### **Mindfulness**

As indicated above, we engage in both categorization and particularization. Engaging in categorization is essentially a "thoughtless" process and engaging in particularization involves thought. Further, we are not always aware of our cognitive processes. Another way of stating this is that we vary in the degree that we are mindful of, consciously aware of, or pay attention to, our communication behavior.

There are several conditions under which we do not think much about our behavior. Much of our communication behavior, for example, is habitual. When we are communicating habitually, we are following a script—"a coherent sequence of events expected by the individual involving him [or her] either as a participant or an observer" (Abelson, 1976, p. 33). According to Langer (1978), when we first encounter a new situation, we consciously seek cues to guide our behavior. As we have repeated experiences with the same event, we have less need to consciously think about our behavior. "The more often we engage in the activity, the more likely it is that we rely on scripts for the completion of the activity and the less likely there will be any correspondence between our actions and those thoughts of ours that occur simultaneously" (Langer, 1978, p. 39).



As indicated above, when we are engaging in habitual or scripted behavior we are not highly aware of what we are doing or saying. To borrow an analogy from a plane, we are on "automatic pilot." In Langer's (1978) terminology, we are "thoughtless." Recent research, however, suggests that we do not communicate totally on automatic pilot. Rather, we pay sufficient attention so that we can recall key words in conversations we have (Kitayama & Burnstein, 1988).

Another condition that contributes to being mindless is the use of categories. Categorization often is based on physical (e.g., gender, race) or cultural (e.g., ethnic background) characteristics, but we also can categorize others in terms of their attitudes (e.g., liberal-conservative) or approaches to life (e.g., Christian or Buddhist; Trungpa, 1973). In order to particularize stimuli, we must become mindful of thought processes. Langer (1989) isolates three qualities of mindfulness: "(1) creation of new categories; (2) openness to new information; and (3) awareness of more than one perspective" (p. 62). She points out that "categorizing is a fundamental and universal human activity. It is the way we come to know the world. Any attempt to eliminate bias by attempting to eliminate the perception of differences is doomed to fail" (p. 154).

Langer argues that being mindful involves making more, not fewer, distinctions. To illustrate, Langer uses an example of people who are in the category "cripple." If we see all people in this category as the same, we start treating the category in which we place them as their identity—cripple. If we draw additional distinction within this category (i.e., create new categories), on the other hand, it stops us from identifying a person as a category. If we draw an additional distinction and see a person with a leg, we do not necessarily regard her or him as a member of that category "cripple," thereby making it possible to see the person as an individual.

We become more conscious of our behavior when we enter new situations as communicating with strangers. The situations under which we are aware of our behavior, however, must be delineated more fully. Berger and Douglas (1982) list the conditions under which we are highly cognizant of our behavior:

- (1) in novel situations where, by definition, no appropriate script exists, (2) where external factors prevent completion of a script, (3) when scripted behavior becomes effortful because substantially more of the behavior is required than is usual, (4) when a desired outcome is experienced, or (5) where multiple scripts come into conflict so that involvement in any one script is suspended. In short, individuals will enact scripted sequences whenever those sequences are available and will continue to do so until events unusable to the script are encountered. (pp. 46-47)

From Berger and Douglas' summary of these conditions, it can be inferred we are more aware of our behavior when communicating with strangers than we are when communicating with people who are familiar.

Improving the effectiveness of our communication with strangers requires that we become aware of how we communicate. Howell (1982) argues that awareness of communication competence can be thought of as a four-stage process: (1) unconscious incompetence, where we misinterpret others' behavior, but are not aware of it; (2) conscious incompetence, where we are aware that we misinterpret others' behavior, but we do not know anything about it; (3) conscious competence, where we think about our communication behavior and consciously modify it to improve our effectiveness (we refer to this stage as mindfulness above); and (4) unconscious competence, where we have

ticed the skills for effective communication to the extent that we no longer have to think about them to use them.

Because of our socialization in our culture, most of us misinterpret strangers' behavior and are not aware of it (i.e., we are unconsciously incompetent). One of the purposes of this [chapter] is to help readers become consciously competent. To accomplish this goal, we present material designed to illustrate the factors that lead to our misinterpretation of strangers' behavior. Once we are consciously incompetent (i.e., understand that we misinterpret strangers' behavior), we can consciously (i.e., mindfully) try to improve our effectiveness. . . .

### ***Uncertainty in Interactions with Strangers***

The predictions we make when we are communicating are aimed at reducing the uncertainty present whenever we communicate with strangers. Berger and Calabrese (1975) point out that the primary concern anytime we meet someone new is uncertainty reduction. Berger (1979) modified this position, arguing that we try to reduce uncertainty when the person we meet will be encountered in the future, provides rewards to us, or behaves in a deviant fashion. Given that strangers, especially those from other cultures or ethnic groups, are likely to behave in a deviant fashion, it is reasonable to say we try to reduce uncertainty when we communicate with strangers more than we do when we communicate with people who are familiar.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) point out there are at least two distinct types of uncertainty present in our interactions with strangers. First, there is the uncertainty we have about strangers' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behavior. We need to be able, for example, to predict which of several alternative behavior patterns strangers will choose to employ. An illustration is the situation when we meet a person we find attractive at a party. Assuming we want to see this person again after the party, we try to think about different ways we can approach this person in order to convince him or her to see us again. The different approaches we think about are the predictions of alternative behaviors that reduce our uncertainty. The second type of uncertainty Berger and Calabrese (1975) isolate involves explanations of strangers' behavior. Whenever we try to figure out why strangers behaved the way they did, we are engaging in explanatory uncertainty reduction. The problem we are addressing is one of reducing the number of possible explanations for the strangers' behavior. This is necessary if we are to understand their behavior and, thus, be able to increase our ability to predict their behavior in the future.

It appears that there is greater uncertainty in our initial interactions with strangers than with people who are familiar (Gudykunst, 1991). This does not mean, however, that we will be motivated to actively reduce uncertainty more when we communicate with strangers than when we communicate with people who are familiar. While strangers may behave in a "deviant" fashion (e.g., not follow *our* norms or communication rules) they rarely are seen as sources of rewards and we may not anticipate seeing them again in the future. When we do not actively try to reduce our uncertainty regarding strangers' behavior, we rely on our categorizations of strangers to reduce our uncertainty and guide our predictions. As indicated earlier, this often leads to misunderstandings.

If we choose to reduce our uncertainty about strangers, there are several strategies we can use. Berger (1979) isolates three general sets of strategies: passive, active, and interactive. When we use passive strategies we take the role of unobtrusive

observers (i.e., we do not intervene in the situation we are observing). To illustrate this process, assume that we want to find out about Hiroko, a Japanese to whom we have just been introduced.

Obviously, the type of situation in which we observe Hiroko influences the amount of information we gain about her. If we observe Hiroko in a situation where she does not have to interact with others, we will not gain much information about her. Situations in which she is interacting with several people at once, in contrast, allow us to make comparisons of how Hiroko interacts with the different people.

If we know any of the people with whom Hiroko is interacting, we can compare how Hiroko interacts with the people we know and how she might interact with us. It also should be noted that if other Japanese are present in the situation, we can compare Hiroko's behavior with theirs to try to determine how she is similar to and different from other Japanese.

There is one other aspect of the situation that will influence the amount of information we obtain about Hiroko's behavior. If the situation is a formal one, her behavior is likely to be a function of the role she is filling in the situation and we will not learn much about Hiroko as an individual. Situations where behavior is not guided by roles or social protocol, on the other hand, will provide useful information on Hiroko's behavior.

The preceding examples all involve our taking the role of an observer. The active strategies for reducing uncertainty require us to do something to acquire information about Hiroko. One thing we could do to get information about Hiroko is to ask questions of someone who knows her. When we ask others about someone we need to keep in mind that the information we receive may not be accurate. The other person may intentionally give us wrong information, or the other person may not really know Hiroko well.

We can also gather information about other groups by asking people who have had contact with those groups or by gathering information from the library. In this example, we could gather information on Japan by questioning someone we know who has lived in Japan or by reading a book on Japanese culture. This would give us information about Hiroko's cultural background that would allow us to make cultural level predictions about her behavior.

When we use active strategies to gather information we do not actually interact with the people about whom we are trying to gather information. The interactive strategies of verbal interrogation (question asking) and self-disclosure, in contrast, are used when we interact with the other person.

One obvious way we can gather information about others is to ask them questions. When we are interacting with someone who is similar, there are limitations to this strategy that have to be kept in mind. First, we can ask only so many questions; we always know when we have asked too many. Second, our questions must be appropriate to the nature of the interaction we are having and the relationship we have with the other person.

When we are communicating with strangers, the same limitations are present, and there are others. The number and type of questions that strangers consider acceptable may not be the same as what we consider acceptable. Strangers also may not be able to answer our questions, especially if our questions deal with why they behave the way they do [the ultimate answer is to "why" questions is "because!" (that is the way we do it here)].

The other way we can gather information about another person when interacting with her or him is through self-disclosure—telling the other person information about ourselves. Self-disclosure works as an information gathering strategy because of the reciprocity norm (Gouldner, 1960). Essentially, the reciprocity norm states that if I do something for you, you will reciprocate and do something for me. The reciprocity norm appears to be a cultural universal; it exists in all cultures.

In conversations between people who are not close (e.g., people we meet for the first time, acquaintances), we tend to reciprocate and tell each other the same information about ourselves that the other person tells us. If Hiroko discloses her opinion on a topic, you will probably tell her your opinion on the same topic. There will, however, be some differences when we communicate with strangers than when we communicate with people from our own group. The topics that are appropriate to be discussed, for example, vary from culture to culture and ethnic group to ethnic group. If we self-disclose on a topic with a stranger and she or he does not reciprocate, there is a good chance we have found an inappropriate topic of conversation in that person's group. Since the timing and pacing of self-disclosure vary across cultures and ethnic groups, it is also possible that our timing is off or we have tried to self-disclose at an inappropriate pace.

### ***Anxiety in Interactions with Strangers***

When we communicate with strangers we not only have a high level of uncertainty, we also have a high level of anxiety. The anxiety we experience when we communicate with strangers usually is based on negative expectations. Research indicates, for example, that actual or anticipated interaction with a member of a different ethnic group leads to anxiety. . . . Stephan and Stephan (1985) argue we fear four types of negative consequences when interacting with strangers.

First we fear negative consequences for our self-concepts. In interacting with strangers, we worry "about feeling incompetent, confused, and not in control . . . anticipate discomfort, frustration, and irritation due to the awkwardness of intergroup interactions" (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 159). We also may fear that we will lose self-esteem, that our social identities will be threatened, and that we will feel guilty if we behave in ways that offend strangers.

Second, we may fear negative behavioral consequences will result from our communication with strangers. We may feel that strangers will exploit us, take advantage of us, or try to dominate us. We also may worry about performing poorly in the presence of strangers or worry that physical harm or verbal conflict will occur.

Third, we fear negative evaluations of strangers. We fear rejection, ridicule, disapproval, and being stereotyped negatively. These negative evaluations, in turn can be seen as threats to our social identities. Recent research suggests that we perceive communication with people who are familiar as more agreeable and less abrasive than communication with strangers (Hoyle, Pinkley, & Insko, 1989).

Finally, we may fear negative evaluations by members of our ingroups. If we interact with strangers, members of our ingroups may disapprove. We may fear that "ingroup members will reject" us, "apply other sanctions," or identify us "with the outgroup" (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 160).

Stephan and Stephan (1985) point out that the anxiety we experience when we communicate with strangers "often has a basis in reality. People sometimes do make embarrassing mistakes, are taken advantage of, and are rejected by ingroup and out-



group members" (p. 160) when communicating with strangers. One of the emotional reactions we have to our expectations of strangers being disconfirmed is that we become frustrated. "Frustration involves feelings of intense discomfort stemming from the blockage of paths toward goals. . . . Frustration, in turn, often leads to aggressive behavior or people try to vent their negative feelings" (Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, & Yong, 1986, p. 250).

Several factors appear to be associated with the amount of anxiety we experience when we communicate with strangers. Thinking about the behavior in which we need to engage when communicating with strangers, for example, can reduce our anxiety about interacting with them (Janis & Mann, 1977). Further, if we focus on finding out as much as we can and on forming accurate impressions of strangers as well as the biases we have, our anxiety and negative expectations will be reduced (Leary, Kowalski, & Bergen, 1988; Neuberg, 1989). Stephan and Stephan (1989) also found that the more intergroup contact we have experienced, the less ethnocentric we are, and the more positive our stereotypes are, the less the intergroup anxiety we experience.

### ***Attributional Processes***

A problem closely related to uncertainty and anxiety reduction is the question of how we utilize information about strangers to reach inferences about their behavior. Attribution theory is instructive concerning this process.

Jones and Nisbett (1972) argue that people performing behavior interpret their behavior differently than do people observing it. Specifically, they suggest people usually attribute their own behavior to situational factors, whereas observers attribute the behavior to qualities of the people being observed. Nisbett, Caputo, Legant, and Marecek (1973) offer two probable explanations for these divergent perspectives. The first is simply a perceptual one. The attention of the people engaging in the behavior is focused on situational cues with which their behavior is coordinated. It therefore appears to people engaging in behavior that their behavior is a response to these situational cues. For observers, however, it is not the situational cues that are salient, but rather the behavior. Observers are more likely to perceive the cause of others' behavior to be a trait or quality inherent in the person exhibiting it. This view suggests that when we communicate with strangers our retroactive explanations of their behavior are likely to focus on characteristics of the strangers (e.g., their cultural background or group membership). The second explanation suggested by Nisbett et al. for the differential bias of people engaging in behavior and observers stems from a difference in the nature and extent of information possessed. In general, the people engaging in behavior know more about their own past behavior and present experiences than do observers. This difference in information may prevent people engaging in behavior from interpreting their behavior in terms of personal characteristics, while allowing observers to make such an interpretation:

If an actor [or actress] insults another person, an observer may be free to infer that the actor [or actress] did so because the actor [or actress] is hostile. The actor [or actress], however, may know that he [or she] rarely insults others and may believe that his [or her] insult was a response to the most recent in a series of provocations from the person he [or she] finally attacked. The difference in information available to the actor [or actress] and observer is, of course, reduced when the actor [or actress] and observer know one another well but is always present to a degree. (Nisbett et al., 1973, p. 155)



When we are communicating with strangers, there is an increased likelihood we will attribute the cause of their behavior to one particular characteristic—namely, their cultural background or group membership. Stated differently, we are not likely to attribute the cause of others' behavior to their culture if they come from the same culture we do, but since strangers often come from another culture or ethnic group, their origin or background is a plausible explanation for their behavior. . . .

## Summary

Communication with people from our own culture, with people from other races or ethnic groups, and with people from other cultures shares the same underlying process. While communication in these different situations differs in degrees, it does not differ in kind. Various names are available to label communication in these different situations, but ambiguity exists as to which label is appropriate for certain situations. Communication between a white person from South Africa and a black person from the United States, for example, can be labeled as either intercultural or interracial communication. Given the similarity of the underlying process of communication and the confusion in applying the various labels, we believe what is needed is a way to refer to the underlying process without referring to a particular situation. Talking about communication with strangers is a way to accomplish this end. Strangers can be conceived of as people who are unknown and unfamiliar and are confronting a group for the first time. A black student in a mainly white school, a Mexican student studying at a university in the United States, a groom meeting the bride's family for the first time, and a manager from the United States working in Thailand are all examples of strangers.

Our communication with strangers is influenced by our conceptual filters, just as their communication with us is influenced by their filters. Our conceptual filters can be placed into four categories: cultural, sociocultural, psychocultural, and environmental. Each of these influences how we interpret messages encoded by strangers and what predictions we make about strangers' behavior. Without understanding the strangers' filters, we cannot accurately interpret or predict their behavior.

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