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# **Intercultural communication.**

## **A general introduction**

NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC)

**NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION**

**NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE**

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**Topics and objectives**

**Topics and objectives**

- ❑ This lecture deals with the following 6 topics:
  1. Presentation of the notion of “culture” and concrete examples.
  2. Discussion of the notion of “cultural identity” is.
  3. The scope of intercultural (or “cross-cultural”) communication.
  4. Typical and recurrent obstacles that impede a successful intercultural communication.
  5. (Negative or positive) impact of cultural (mis)communication
  6. Possibilities to improve intercultural communication.

**Topics and objectives**

- ❑ The central objective of this lecture is to **make** you **aware of**:
  1. the extreme complexity of what is called “**cultural diversity**”
  2. the central importance of an appropriate understanding and “use” of group or community specific visions and values for the development of **stable**, sustainable and peaceful **relationships** between **communities** possessing **different ethnic, linguistic, religious, ideological, ... origins**.



**The notion of « culture »**

The notion of  
« culture »

- ❑ A general definition of culture:
- ❑ Culture is a **complex cognitive system** mainly composed of:
  - ✓ (dogmatic, basic, “revealed”) **believes**,
  - ✓ (critical) **knowledge** and (technical) **know-how**,
  - ✓ (normative) **rules** (laws, ...) and **values**
- ❑ A culture, in this sense, constitutes or forms **identities**:
  - ✓ the (**personal**) **identity** of an individual;
  - ✓ the (**collective**) **identity** of a social actor:
    - of (religious, ethnic, linguistic) “**communities**”,
    - of (national, international, political, economic, military, ...) **institutions, groups, classes, ...**.

The notion of  
« culture »

- ❑ Practically, we are “immersed” in a huge diversity of **different types or genres of culture**:
  - ✓ **Intellectual cultures** (spiritual, religious, “humanistic”, artistic, ...) => general and basic values ...
  - ✓ **Social cultures** (social groups, social hierarchy, social practices, ...) => organisation of a social structure,
  - ✓ **Political cultures** (governance, law and order, coercion, ...) => maintenance of a social structure
  - ✓ **Daily life cultures** (housing, eating/drinking, wearing clothes, interacting/communicating, ...) =>
  - ✓ **Technical and scientific cultures** (producing, r ...) => means, tools, know-how of a social structure.
- ❑ Note: all these different types or genres of culture are interwoven, interrelated

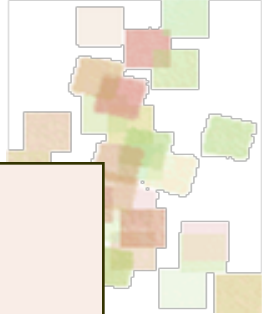
The notion of  
« culture »

- ❑ 4 main features characterising culture as a whole:
  1. A culture “frames” the **world view** of a community, a group (cf. A. Schütz, M. Foucault).
  2. A culture is a **collective cognitive (intellectual) resource** of a group or community for dealing with living in its world and for satisfying its needs (cf. C. Lévi-Strauss).
  3. A culture is also a **symbolic capital** – a **power** – distributed in a highly unbalanced way over populations having to share the same physical space, the same resources, etc (cf. P. Bourdieu).
  4. Culture is, finally a **historical entity** – it changes through time due especially to internal differentiation, cross-cultural contacts (“métissage”) and learning (N. Elias).





**The notion of « cultural identity »**



The notion of  
« cultural identity »

- ❑ The **cultural identity** of a person or a community is multi-faceted and mainly based on a set of **shared common references**:
  - ✓ a common **language** and **communication and interaction patterns** (“etiquette”, gesture, mimicry, “language style”, “argumentation”, ...),
  - ✓ a common vision of the **social structure** and **doing** (family, institutions, groups, clubs, ...),
  - ✓ a common conception of the **social space** (intimate space, private space, public, ...),
  - ✓ a common conception of the **social rhythm** (life timing: daily life, calendar, ...),

The notion of  
« cultural identity »

- ❑ The cultural identity (*continued*):
  - ✓ a common conception of the social **relevancy and added value** of (natural) **objects, artefacts, instruments, services, consumables**, etc.,
  - ✓ the sharing of common **decision and policy making systems**,
  - ✓ common **religious and other intellectual references**,
  - ✓ especially: common **traditions, customs**, a (supposed) common **history**, (supposed) common **origins**, etc.
  - ✓ especially: common “**collective symbolism**”:
    - **historical personalities** (kings, warriors, thinkers, ...),
    - **anthropomorphic entities** (gods, imaginary figures, ...),
    - (historical or mythical) **events**,
    - **emblems**,
    - “**big texts**”
    - etc.

The notion of  
« cultural identity »

- ❑ In this sense, the **cultural identity** (or specificity) of a person or a group can be “**read**” and **interpreted** through:
  - ✓ “a whole set of **signs** by which the members of a given society **recognize one another**, while **distinguishing** them from people not belonging to that society” (UNESCO)
- ❑ Main sign systems:
  - ✓ “**Natural signs**”: human body + movement (kinaesthesia), physical environment, ...
  - ✓ **Human made signs** (“**artefacts**”):
    - **Language** and **texts**: phraseology, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, ...
    - **Visual** (figurative and symbolic) representations and “**oeuvres**”
    - **Tools, instruments, “consumables”**, ...: clothing, eating, housing, ...
- ❑ **Culture** = a sort of (**living**) “**text**” that someone with the necessary competence can read and understand.

The notion of  
« cultural identity »

- ❑ However: No community, no person is a “culturally monolithic” entity
- ❑ A community is always confronted to potential internal tensions between:
  - ✓ the “orthodox” and the “heterodox”,
  - ✓ the “dominant” class and the “dominated” class
  - ✓ the “elder” and the “younger” generation,
  - ✓ etc.
- ❑ Furthermore : a person –
  - ✓ always belongs to more than one culture
  - ✓ among which there can exist – “psychological” – tensions (example: tension between “national” and “religious” sentiments, military obligations and religious convictions, …).



**What is intercultural/cross-cultural communication ?**

## The scope of intercultural communication

- ❑ Intercultural (or “cross-cultural”) communication, broadly speaking is :
  - ✓ the (**direct** or **mediated**) **interaction** between people belonging to **different** cultures, possessing different references, beliefs, values, traditions, histories, languages, ...
    - in order to **achieve** (commonly accepted) **objectives or goals**
    - and **in being aware** of the **cultural diversity** of the participants as an intrinsically **added value** which should be respected and “cultivated”.
- ❑ Distinction of “**intercultural communication**” as a **phenomenon** and as a kind of “**social philosophy**”.

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

- ❑ Typical **intercultural** or cross-cultural **projects** and **programs**:
  - ✓ Implementation of (**economic, social, medical, ...**) **programs** in developing countries,
  - ✓ **Community education** and **cross-community consensus building** in multicultural (urban) environments;
  - ✓ (**Political, economic, military, ...**) **consensus building** between different, national and international actors;
  - ✓ Building and management of **global (economic, social, ...)** **projects** requiring the participation of people belonging to different traditions,
  - ✓ **Humanitarian interventions** (peace keeping, natural catastrophes, ...) requiring a knowledge of the “beneficiary” culture and its active participation .



The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication:

1 – Social communication:

❑ Typical objectives:

- ✓ To convince people from communities with different (ethnic, religious, linguistic, ...) backgrounds to **adopt** and/or **to respect common, socially accepted rules (laws) and values** in their daily life;
- ✓ To enable people from communities with different (ethnic, religious, linguistic, ...) backgrounds **to overcome blocked situations of “mutual exclusion and ignorance”**.

❑ Typical examples:

- ✓ Reduction of the danger of (inter-communitarian) acts of violence, riots, etc. in peri-urban context
- ✓ Building of cultural awareness through artistic animations, intercultural events, ...

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

- ❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

2 - (Sustainable) development communication:

- ❑ Typical objective:
  - ✓ enable (vulnerable, threatened, ...) communities to initiate their own, **autonomous development** aiming at a better quality of life.
- ❑ Typical example:
  - ✓ Programs aiming at the reduction of poverty through the implementation of community appropriate businesses and credit circles
  - ✓ Creation of community specific education centres
  - ✓ Creation of community specific information and education media
  - ✓ ...

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

- ❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

### 3 – Cultural and linguistic mediation:

- ❑ Typical objectives:
  - ✓ Contribute to the (linguistic and social) **adaptation** and **integration** of “foreigners” (immigrants, refugees, ...) in a “host” country
- ❑ Typical example:
  - ✓ linguistic and social education (“alphabetisation”) programs and structures (associations, ...),
  - ✓ community interpretation projects (i.e. projects aiming to accompany and to council “foreigners” in their daily life and professional problems)

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

- ❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

#### 4 – International communication:

- ❑ Typical objective:
  - ✓ negotiate and establish **cross-cultural consensus** between **people acting globally** but belonging to different cultures and traditions
- ❑ Typical example:
  - ✓ creation of common (global, regional, ...) political, economic, social, ... spaces;
  - ✓ Creation of transnational (public, private) institutions;
  - ✓ Creation of international programs and projects of economic, political or social interest.

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

- ❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

5 – Community driven (general or specialised) information media communication:


- ❑ Objective:
  - ✓ create and/or maintain **common collective** (community binding) **references**,
  - ✓ make people believe that they belong to one community (even if this community is a “diasporic
- ❑ Typical example:
  - ✓ mass media for diasporic (ethnic, religious, political, ... communities
  - ✓ Traditional and/or “alternative” media for specific social communities

The scope of  
intercultural  
communication

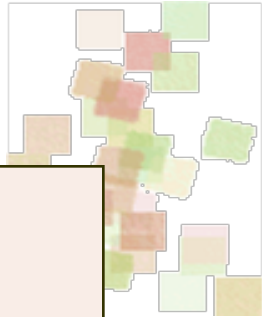
- ❑ 6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

### 6 – Intercultural marketing and management:

- ❑ Objective
  - ✓ Use the cultural specificity of the people of a “target” community for achieving successfully mainly **commercial objectives**.
- ❑ Typical example:
  - ✓ the “globalisation” of a (regional) food such as the originally (Italian) pizza, the (US) hamburger, etc.;
  - ✓ The opening of different non-European markets for a French luxury product, ...;
  - ✓ The optimal use of “human capital” with respect to a given norm or mission (i.e. management of multicultural teams, troops, ...).



**Where intercultural communication can lead to misunderstandings**



## Intercultural obstacles

- ❑ There are a series of typical “**obstacles**” impeding an efficient (successful) intercultural or cross-cultural communication:

### 1 – Obstacle with regard to a “foreign” language deficit:

- ✓ Lack of an appropriate linguistic competence to understand and to speak correctly the other’s mother tongue;
- ✓ Use of a **simplified “communication language”** (in general: a kind of English = “global English”).

### 2 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit of understanding of community specific direct communication or interaction patterns (routines):

- ✓ Lack of an appropriate competence (experience) of interacting **verbally, visually, bodily**, ... with the culturally other in **routine** (daily life, professional, ...) situations and, more especially, in **private** situations.



## Intercultural obstacles

❑ Series of typical intercultural communication “obstacles” (*continued*):

3 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit in “social face management” specific to a given target community

- ✓ Lack of understanding of “**etiquettes**” and **values** governing the interactions between people in a given community: rules of courtesy and politeness, of respect, of honour, etc.

4 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit of understanding the social space organising the daily (professional, private, ...) life of a target community

- ✓ Lack of understanding the **structure** of this space and the **rules** the **behaviour**, for instance, in sacred places, in open places, in private places, etc.

**Intercultural  
obstacles**

❑ Series of typical intercultural communication “obstacles” (*continued*):

5 – Obstacle with respect to the (partial) absence of an appropriate knowledge of the community specific social institutions, social networks and practices

- ✓ Lack of an appropriate **social** and **intellectual alphabetisation** (example: of community stakeholders, community specific decision and policy making procedures, etc.).

6 – Obstacle of cultural ethnocentrism

- ✓ Interpretation of the culture of a given (“target”) community **through the lenses of one’s own culture** (believes, knowledge and values);
- ✓ Typical example: how to behave with respect to social practices that are not acceptable with respect to our own vision? How to handle the reference to “universal rights”, “basic rights”, etc.

**Intercultural  
obstacles**

- ❑ Series of typical intercultural communication “obstacles” (*continued*):

**7 – Two specific cases of ethnocentrism:**

- ✓ the “common sense mistake” (“common sense” is culturally dependent)
- ✓ The “best intention mistake” (“best intentions” are culturally determined)



**Impact of cultural (mis)communication**

## Impact of cultural (mis) communication

- ❑ The **negative impact** of the quoted obstacles can largely vary, depending on different “situational” parameters such as:
  - ✓ **mutual knowledge** between the concerned groups/communities,
  - ✓ **previous experiences** in cross-cultural interactions,
  - ✓ **communicational intentionality** (was there an intentional plan to hurt, to violate a cultural value?),
  - ✓ **repetitiveness of a (cross-cultural) mistake**,
  - ✓ **gravity** of a (cross-cultural) mistake,
  - ✓ **“global atmosphere”** between the participants of an interaction.

Impact of cultural  
(mis)  
communication

- ❑ However, a specific, very serious and unfortunately frequent consequence of cross-cultural (mis)communication is the so-called:
  - ✓ “intractable (long term) conflict situation”
  - ⇒ Reference : the very valuable “[Beyond Intractability Project](#)” of Guy and Heidi Burgess; University of Colorado at Boulder)
- ❑ An intractable conflict situation is mainly rooted in general “**identity problems**” due to (*cf. above quoted project*):
  - ✓ 1/ **deep cultural** (moral, religious, ideological, political, ...) **value differences**;
  - ✓ 2/ **high-stakes distributional issues**.

Impact of cultural  
(mis)  
communication

□ Examples of intractable conflict situations:

- ✓ Identity clash between communities living in one region (Kashmir, Bosnia, Rwanda, ...)
- ✓ The “split history” syndrome (example: the oppressor/victim tradition in the history of Argentina, Chile, France/Algeria, or again Rwanda, ...)
- ✓ The social revolt theme (like in to-day’s Greece, in rural and peri-urban regions of South-America and South Africa, ...)
- ✓ Enemy stereotyping including the tentative to “dehumanise the other” (cf. Z. Bauman) – a typical process in war times.

Impact of cultural  
(mis)  
communication

- ❑ **Principal benefit** of successful intercultural or cross-cultural interactions (following UNESCO, FAO, World Bank, ...):
  - ✓ Perspective to create **trustful** and **sustainable relationships** between culturally diverse communities (or stakeholders of culturally diverse communities)
  - ✓ as a basis for any future interaction avoiding irreversible, intractable conflict situations.





**How to improve intercultural communication ?**

## How to improve intercultural communication?

- ❑ The main challenge in intercultural or “cross-cultural” communication is that of
  - ✓ “**cultural awareness**” (as well as “cultural self awareness”)
  - ✓ i.e. the fact to become aware of the **cultural** (ethnic, linguistic, religious, ...) **specificity** of the people with whom we have to interact.
  
- ❑ The challenge of “cultural awareness”:
  - 1/ as a **knowledge** to be cultivated and learned;
  - 2/ as a “**social technology**” already integrated in cross-cultural programs and actions;
  - 3/ as a “**personal aid**” in concrete situations.

How to improve  
intercultural  
communication?

1 – “Cultural awareness” as a knowledge resource to be cultivated:

- ✓ through very official **academical curricula**,
- ✓ thanks to highly valuable **practical online courses** (cf. bibliography),
- ✓ through systematic scientific field work, i.e. expertises in **cultural analysis** of communities or social groups.

How to improve  
intercultural  
communication?

## 2 – Cultural awareness as a “social technology”:

- ❑ Cultural awareness is already “implemented” in a big variety of intercultural programs in form, for instance:
  1. of **community stakeholders negotiations** (cf. World Bank, ...)
  2. or of so-called **participatory programs** (cf. FAO, UNESCO, ...) – of:
    - “**collaborative program (action) design**”,
    - “**grassroots process design**” (“community mobilization programs”),
    - **public participation** programs (vs mere “elite negotiation”),
    - etc.

How to improve  
intercultural  
communication?

3 – Cultural awareness as a “**personal aid**” in concrete situations: set of practical “rules of thumb” should be observed in a intercultural/ cross-cultural interaction:

- engaged in a concrete interaction/communication, **assume always** that there are **differences** until similarity is proven;
- **mistrust “general cultural patterns”** (“stereotypes”) for assessing the other with whom you are interacting,
- **mistrust** your **own** assumptions, verities and evidences – they all belong to your culture;
- **mistrust** also your “**natural**” **tendencies** (empathies, emotions, “best intentions”, etc.),



**Some e-resources**

## E-resources

- ❑ Tracy Bowens: [Cross-cultural training](#).
- ❑ Hans Gullestrup, [Cultural analysis – towards cross-cultural understanding](#). Aalborg University Press 2006
- ❑ Pekka Seppälä and Arja Vainio-Mattila: [Navigating culture](#). A Roadmap to culture and development. Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for International Development Cooperation Helsinki, Finland (2000)
- ❑ “[Beyond Intractability Project](#)” of Guy and Heidi Burgess; University of Colorado at Boulder
- ❑ [Sémiotique des cultures, communication interculturelle, nouveaux médias](#). Online pedagogical material (in French and English) available on the web portal of the research lab ESCoM in Paris.