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COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

Have they understood what is at stake? Why do they avoid answering the question? Why are they being aloof and distant? In cross-cultural interactions, such questions can easily come to the fore. The usual challenges of interviews are compounded by the need to decipher what an interviewee's actions reflect, deceit, or a culturally influenced way of interacting?

So, why can interacting across cultures end in misunderstanding? The answer stems from the fact that humans rely on a set of internal norms and expectations to guide their actions. These develop over childhood and are refined by daily experiences. As a consequence, they are different for each one of us. Differences in beliefs about how to interact with authority, in how to express emotions and thoughts, in how we respond to persuasion, in how we take turns and follow the 'etiquette' of interaction, and even in what we understand by 'crime' and 'lying'. These examples just scratch the surface.

Ordinarily, such norms simplify interaction by allowing us to anticipate the other person's behaviour. In cross-cultural interactions, the norms of one person are often not those underpinning the behaviour of their counterpart. The result is that norms mislead how the other person's behaviour is understood.

CROSS-CULTURAL JUDGMENTS ABOUT DECEPTION

If you need convincing that cross-cultural interactions carry their own challenges, then consider research on the age-old task of spotting a liar. Most of us are poor at spotting liars, and we get worse when those we are judging have a different cultural background. In 1990, Charles Bond and his colleagues asked Jordanian and US undergraduate students to judge the genuine and fabricated statements of their peers. The students identified deception with a better-than-chance accuracy when judging their own culture, but not when judging across cultures. The accuracy of within-culture detection averaged 56%, which is equivalent to the accuracies reported in previous research. The accuracy of cross-cultural judgments, however, averaged 49%, they may as well have guessed.

This pattern of performance has been found time and time again. American, Indian, Jordanian, Korean and Spanish students have all shown above-chance accuracy rates for within culture judgements, but rates little better than chance when judging across cultures. Interestingly, these students report basing their judgements, in part, on how they feel others from their culture would react. They are not therefore relying on some absolute criteria of what liars do. Rather, they are relying on culturally determined cues, apparently unaware that these may not remain valid across cultures.

So, why does the accuracy of our judgements decrease across cultures? One explanation is known as the expectancy violation model. It proposes that people infer deception when a communicator violates what the observer anticipates seeing and hearing. They seek a plausible explanation for the behaviour and, in the absence of other information, that plausible explanation becomes "this person is lying." For example, in one study, observers perceived actors who perform strange and unexpected behaviours (e.g., head tilting and staring) as more dishonest than those who did not perform such behaviours. This was true regardless of whether the actor was telling the truth or lying.

The lying example gives us some idea of why cultural differences in behaviour lead to misjudgements. How, then, to overcome such biases? One approach would be to learn the theories and findings that science has produced, and apply that knowledge to individual cases. The difficulty with this approach is that investigators would need to remember a significant amount of material and translate that material 'on-demand' to the situation at hand. When under pressure that's quite a challenge. Is it realistic to expect a careful and considered application of aggregate research findings in those kinds of circumstances?

There's No Need To Shout!

A second approach is to substitute making prescriptive suggestions with a descriptive account that highlights the kinds of issues that arise. In this top-down approach, the focus is on providing investigators with an understanding of why differences are observed, rather than encouraging them to memorise a range of cultural differences. A number of researchers have shown that this kind of exposure to characteristic problems improves cross-cultural sensemaking.

Chart 1 gives an example of a top-down approach. In Chart 1, the top half – Communication Features – describes issues that have been shown to result in misunderstandings. The bottom half – Learning points – summarises a point worth remembering. The Chart is structured around four kinds of dialogue: orientation, which seeks to establish the nature of the engagement; relational, which seeks to manage the interpersonal dynamic (e.g., attempts to put them at ease); problem-solving, which seeks to develop acceptable solutions or exchange information; and resolution, which occurs as interactions, or particular parts of dialogue, conclude.

ORIENTATION DIALOGUE

Orientation dialogue dominates early stages of interaction. An orientation may be as short as a few sentences to initiate dialogue, such as occurs during an airport screening. Or, it may take longer as parties define their relationship and the way forward, such as occurs within a police interview.

Two factors that often raise confusion during this time are small talk and role differences. Small talk serves a number of purposes, which are often described as 'ticking over' behaviours. In investigative contexts, small talk helps to get the interaction going with the interviewee.

However, cultures differ in their use of small talk. Do you remember the children's book A Bear Called Paddington? When it was translated for the German market, entire sequences were omitted to accommodate the characteristic absence of small talk in the German language. This version of the story can read as cold and abrupt to those accustomed to small talk. Similarly, it is easy for interviewers to see those who overlook small talk by, for example, avoiding eye contact and giving short answers, as being rude or unforthcoming. That's not always a correct interpretation of their behaviour.

The status of an interviewer and how she or he acts towards the interviewee can also dramatically shape the way an interaction unfolds. Although role effects are relevant to all stages of an interaction, they are critical during orientation because roles are determined at this stage. In law enforcement settings, the aspect of role that tends to dominate is authority. For example, many East-Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese) are sensitive to hierarchy and positions, and interviewees from these cultures are likely to be respectful of an investigator who presents with authority. While this can be useful, it can also be detrimental when the interviewee's reaction to authority is to show deference by being silent. In contrast, many with Middle-Eastern cultural backgrounds will respect but mistrust authority. This can manifest as an antagonistic interpersonal style, which heightens tension and may inappropriately raise an investigator's suspicions.

A related influence of role on cross-cultural interactions concerns memory. Studies show that we are more likely to conform to a story presented to us by someone perceived as high-powered compared to someone perceived as low-powered, and this effect is more pronounced in stressful contexts. This is perhaps why, in some cross-cultural interactions, investigators are confronted with agreement to everything that they say. The interviewee's answers relate to what she or he thinks the investigator wants to hear, rather than what is in fact true.

RELATIONAL DIALOGUE

Relational dialogue refers to interaction that is focused on issues such as personal reputation, identity, and social belonging. It is critical to cross-cultural interactions because of the different ways in which cultures value social groups and personal standing, and how these values manifest in conversations.

One example of this, referred to as 'storytelling' in Chart 1, is the different ways in which people convey experiences. Native speakers of English typically tell stories through a short 'scene setting' and a 'linear' account of the story's main events. By contrast, other cultures engage in a more participatory form of storytelling. Here, listener feedback and interjections are expected, and descriptions of the wider context of actors' backgrounds and relationships are as much a part of the account as the event itself. This 'contextualisation' can overwhelm those accustomed to more event-driven storytelling, which can in turn lead to pejorative evaluations of stories as rambling, unfocused, and ultimately not credible.

A second example of relational misunderstanding concerns the use of empathy. Investigators often express empathy to get 'on side' and gain the trust of another. They present a willingness to listen to someone, express sympathy for their situation, or suggest a common experience or perspective on an issue.

When this approach is used in interactions with those from cultures in which social group is valued (e.g., as is typical of people from China, Kurdistan, and Surinam), the reaction is surprising. Rather than improve cooperation, empathy in these interactions often elicits a negative response. Although the reason for this is not clear-cut, the current thinking is that it has to do with 'face' or 'honour', which are dominant within these cultures. Empathising in situations where empathy is not particularly warranted may be perceived as undermining face, and as a challenge rather than an attempt at increasing affiliation.

PROBLEM-SOLVING DIALOGUE

The third type of dialogue in Chart 1, problem-solving dialogue, typically emerges out of the orientation and relational phases. The focus of this dialogue is exploring issues and resolving suspicions. It may be a sequence of questions and answers to gather information, or an attempt to elicit information by systematically presenting evidence.

To many from Western cultures, the typical way of eliciting information is to engage in argument and persuasion. Identifying inconsistencies in a story, pointing out the absence of evidence, and debating relative values, are characteristic of a persuasion approach that is successful in cultures where communication focuses on message content. These cultures are referred to as 'low-context' cultures – the meaning of the interaction is mainly in the words exchanged. However, this is not true of all cultures. Many solve problems and resolve conflicts in ways that are less direct, where meaning is located in the social or physical context of the interaction rather than solely in its content. Persuasion is less central to the interaction of these, 'high-context', cultures. It is often left un-reciprocated, giving the feeling that one is going 'around in circles.' This can easily raise the suspicions of somebody who expects debate.

When an issue cannot be resolved and interaction reaches an impasse, it is sometimes necessary to lay down an ultimatum. An interviewer may suggest, for example, that it is impossible to move forward before a particular piece of evidence is available (e.g., "there is little I can do until..."). While investigators know that it is best to avoid ultimatums, some recent research suggests some intriguing cultural differences in the way people respond to such behaviour. With 'low-context' Dutch suspects, research found the use of ultimatums to be most effective when focused on personal issues. In contrast, with 'high-context' Moroccan suspects, ultimatums were more effective when focused on friends or family. This highlights again the different values that cultures place on different forms of communication.

RESOLUTION DIALOGUE

The final phase in Chart 1 concerns the closing stages of interaction, where decisions are made and resolutions achieved.

While the closure of interaction can emerge naturally out of problem-solving, in cross-cultural interactions it is often the case that each party has a different understanding of what has been agreed. For example, research suggests that many police detectives are unsure about what to do when a suspect shows signs of resistance, and that they often interpret the resistance as an indication of guilt. Yet, suspects may show resistance for a number of reasons, even when they are not guilty. They may not trust the police to recognise their innocence, or they may be concerned about incriminating themselves in the enquiry. This is why current interviewing training focuses less on how to obtain a confession and more on how to gather information about the circumstances surrounding the time in question.

A second issue that is often prominent at the end of interactions, though clearly important throughout, is 'face'. Face is an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction. For some cultures 'face' is a paramount motivation, to the extent that people will be willing to provide false information, or not reveal true information, if doing so saves personal face or the face of the interviewer (e.g., if the interviewer has made a mistake). An often-cited example of this is when business negotiations end in a "yes" but the deal falls through.

In this context, the "yes" is used to not embarrass the businessman at the end of the meeting, rather than an indication of agreement to the proposed deal. It is perhaps inevitable that such behaviour will be seen as deliberate evasion by some cultures, although the motivation behind the message is more complex than it may first appear.

One interesting consequence of examining cross-cultural interactions using the four kinds of dialogue outlined in Chart 1 is that it becomes apparent how misunderstandings can accumulate over time. Arguably, out of the phases, it is the early orientation and relational aspects of dialogue that are most vulnerable to misunderstanding. If people struggle over problem-solving aspects of interaction, there is a good chance that such misunderstandings will surface during their discussion. In contrast, issues relating to relationship or role may be difficult to spot, and even harder to undo as an interaction unfolds. Being aware of such issues is the first step to avoiding cultural misunderstandings.

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	ORIENTATION DIALOGUE	RELATIONAL DIALOGUE	PROBLEM-SOLVING DIALOGUE	RESOLUTION DIALOGUE
COMMUNICATION FEATURE	Small talk – dialogue that is tangential to the substance of interaction. Some cultures are not used to engaging in this way Role differences – perceived differences in status and action towards the other. Can lead to avoidance and/or aggression. It can also lead to memory conformity	Story telling – dialogue that appears rambling is appropriate contextualised storytelling for some cultures. Not all cultures use a linear story line when recounting Empathising – dialogue that seeks to gain trust and get the other "on side" is not effective in all cultures, because it is perceived as patronising	Persuasion – arguments and discussion are less central to some cultures, and thus less effective as interaction tactics Ultimatums – while necessary in certain circumstances, such forcing tactics can evoke a particularly negative reaction from Middle-Eastern cultures	Resistance – dialogue that attempts to delay or stall a solution can be used for other legitimate, cultural reasons Issues of face – for some cultures, appearing honourable and leaving the interaction with the respect of others is critical
LEARNING POINT	Small talk – be cautious not to pre-judge somebody as rude or distant because they don't engage in small talk Role differences – if appropriate, identify the role to take to provide a strategic advantage	Story telling – the more information the better, so remain patient and listen to the contextual storyteller Empathising – avoid using with high-context cultures such as Middle Eastern and Far East, as it may lead them to become defensive	Rational persuasion – consider more collaborative interactions with high-context cultures Ultimatums – use sparingly and, rather than repeat, seek an alternative solution from the interviewee	Resistance – be open minded as to why the interviewee is resisting an agreement (explore 'why'; don't try to force the solution) Issues of face – remember that solutions are not all about substantive exchanges/issues

Chart 1. A summary of eight communication dynamics that often lead to misunderstandings during cross-cultural interactions