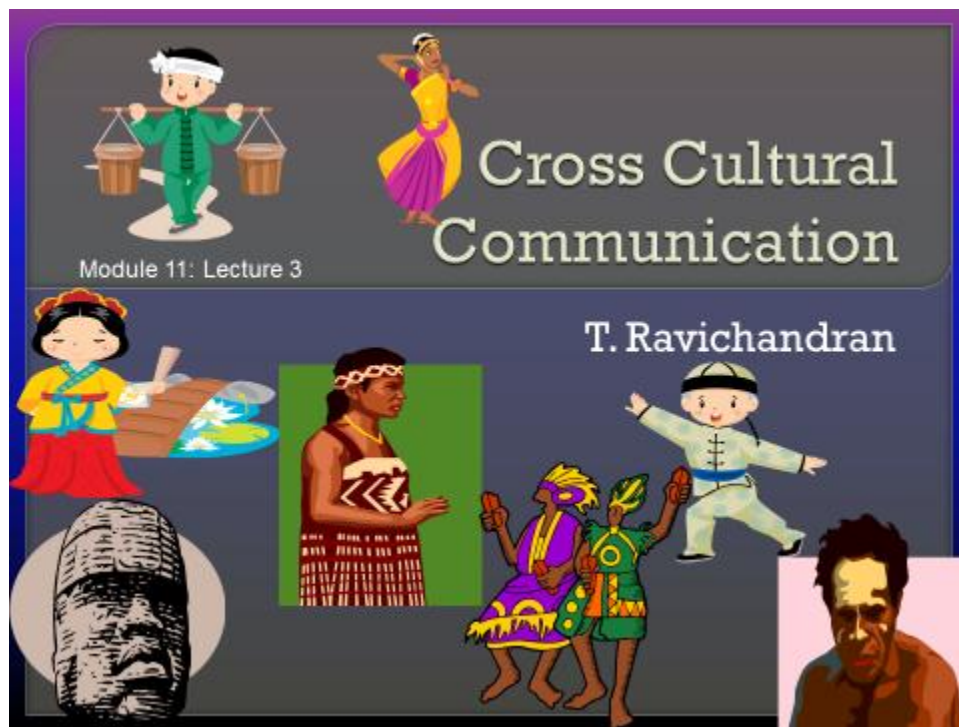


Communication Skills: Lecture No. 36

Module 11

Lecture 3

CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION



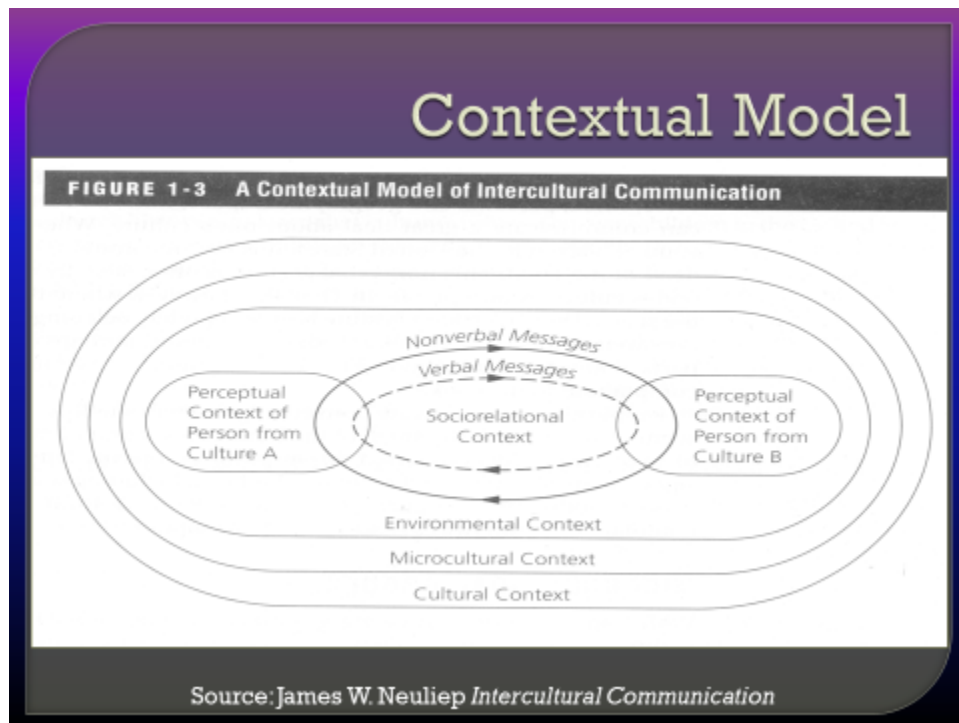
In the previous lectures, you have learnt about the ‘Necessity of Cross Cultural Communication,’ ‘the Benefits of Cross Cultural Communication,’ and the ‘Barriers to Cross Cultural Communication’ followed by some suitable suggestions for ‘Overcoming’ them.

In this lecture, you will learn about the five dimensions of cultural variability and understand how they can affect cross cultural communication.

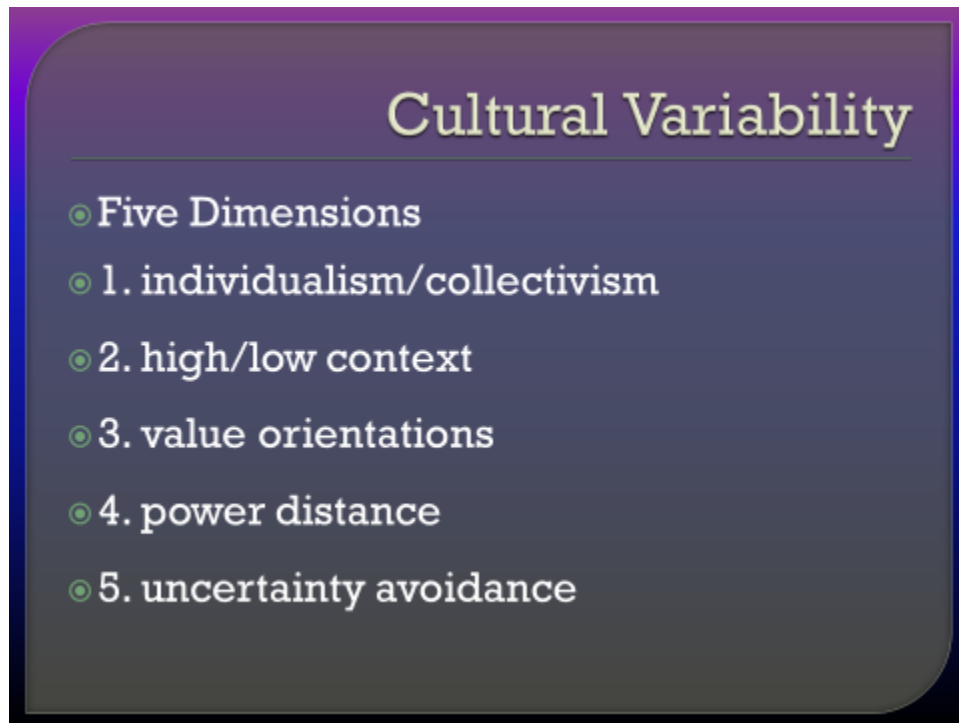
Context

Context is implied in cross/inter cultural communication. It includes setting, situation and circumstance. Setting refers to the background, the environment in which communication takes place. It could mean interaction between people from a highly populated place with those from the lowest populated place. Situation in which you are communicating can be personal, professional or social. It can be joyful or mourning. Understanding the context and situation is significant because the cultural encoding varies according to them. For instance, in a situation of mourning, the colour code that is used to express it in an Indian context is different from that in the Western cultural context. In India, people wear white dress on the day of mourning. Widows are identified by white colour dress. Whereas, in the Western cultural contexts, people wear black dress for mourning, and interestingly, the bride on the occasion of marriage wears white dress.

Cross/inter cultural communication occurs whenever two or more persons come together and exchange verbal/nonverbal messages. Cross/intercultural communication occurs within the variety of context including: (1) Cultural, (2) micro cultural, (3) environmental, (4) socio relational and (5) perceptual contexts of the persons. James W. Neuliep, in his book *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*, propounds the following model:



Now in the remaining part of this module, we will be looking at each of these contexts in detail. Specifically, we will be focusing on the following five dimensions of cultural variability that affect cross/inter cultural communication.



Individualism and Collectivism

Individualism, as the term suggests, refers to a culture in which individuals and their goals are given importance. In collectivism, the goals are set in a collective manner and individuals are expected to sacrifice their own selfish needs in favour of the collective goals. Although, they appear to be polar opposites, today it is difficult to find one country following exclusively individualism or collectivism. We can only identify nations with high level of individualism (the USA) or high level of collectivism (Japan). We should also understand that there are certain cultures like that of the Norwegian's which possess both tendencies. Similarly countries noted for collectivism like Japan are moving towards individualism, and vice versa.

What is needed for effective cross/inter cultural communication is proper understanding of people and their corresponding behaviour with regard to individual and collectivist cultural contexts. In individualistic cultures, the individual is emotionally disconnected from in-groups such as family, whereas, the collectivists are emotionally connected to the in-groups. In

individualistic cultures, people are taught to be creative, self-reliant, competitive, and assertive, contrary to the collectivist culture where people are taught to be conformist and cooperative.

Affluence, that is, material prosperity, richness in terms of wealth, can also be correlated to individualism. Similarly, individual growth is facilitated by cooler climate conditions; conversely, warmer climate conditions nurture collectivism. In terms of social control, personal guilt is associated with individualists, rather than shame, that is related with collectivists. Therefore, a person's individualistic or collectivistic tendencies certainly will affect the way s/he communicates. A person's behaviour may be *idiocentric* (individual centric) or *allocentric* (collective centric). The communication goal is to recognize and understand the differences so as to increase one's cross cultural competence.

High/Low-Context Communication

The second dimension of variation is 'high/low context communication.' Human communication depends on the context in which it occurs. In high context communication, the focus is on non-verbal clues. In low context communication culture, the focus is on verbal clues. In low context, people believe in verbal exchange of ideas, they believe in articulating and syntactifying everything including their feelings. To the contrary, people from high contexts would even be very comfortable with silence. They will be very happy to exchange ideas with minimum number of words and maximum of nonverbal gestures. That's why, when somebody from high context keeps quiet, it's very discomfoting for a person from the low context culture. While high context people encode their messages in implicit nonverbal clues; in low context communication people make use of explicit coding of their messages. High context cultures are generally collectivistic such as cultures represented by China, Japan, North and South Korea. Low context cultures are prone to be individualistic like Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia, US, UK, and France.

Value Orientations

The values orientations of people influence the way they interact with each other. In terms of intercultural communication, messages are guided by and reflect people's value orientations. Like culture, values are learnt; they are not innate or universal. This implies that people are not born with inner values; values are given to them through the cultural narratives, historical documents, and social interactions. What is important about values is that they prescribe what is preferred or prohibited. And what is preferred in one culture may be prohibited in another.

In this way, values form the core part of evaluative component in communication. They guide human beings in assessing what is right or wrong, and they trigger positive as well as negative emotions. People like or detest others according to one's intrinsic values. Values are formed according to one's conviction and orientation with dominant themes relating to self, family, society, human nature, nature, and supernatural. For instance, in terms of family, low context culture values individualistic and democratic setup; it is open and facilitates high mobility. In case of high culture, the family is lineal, authoritarian, norms are prescribed and strictly followed and it promotes low mobility.

Power Distance

Another interesting variable that affects communication irrespective of the fact whether it is high or low context culture is the maintenance of power distance. This refers to the distance or the absence of distance, that is proximity or lack of it, maintained in individual or group relations. This is evident in terms of power equations such as the boss and the worker; the higher authority and the subordinate; the teacher and the student; the senior and the junior; the husband and the wife; the mother in law and the daughter in law; the leaders and the followers, and so on.

Inequality in relationships will be due to unequal power distribution. If the power is equally distributed, automatically it will generate equality. Inequality will certainly arise when the power distribution is not equal. All cultures have some forms of inequality in areas as prestige, wealth, power, human rights, and technology. Take for instance, the use of internet technology has already divided the world between the ones who can afford to connect and the ones who cannot. So apart from money, technological innovations and their affordability contribute to power distance by creating a new class of 'haves' and have nots'.

Interestingly, power distance can be seen in families, bureaucracies, friendships, and even intimate relationships. Healthy relationships, however, can grow only in the absence of dominance and the struggle for power distance. Nonetheless, if you look at military organizations, they are fully defined by power distance and it is considered to be acceptable in all cultures for practical purposes.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The final variation that can determine the level of cultural conflicts is uncertainty avoidance. This refers to the degree to which the members of a particular culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. We always want to be very sure of the people with whom we want to interact. We tend to avoid those we are uncertain and think that they are unpredictable in

their behaviour, hence harm us any time. When uncertainty is high; anxiety is high, and communication can be difficult and awkward. By reducing uncertainty, anxiety can be reduced and can facilitate effective and successful communication.

People also have weak or strong uncertainty avoidance. People with weak uncertainty orientation see uncertainty itself as a normal part and are comfortable with ambiguity. Conversely, people with strong uncertainty avoidance find uncertainty itself as a continuous threat to be fought owing to which they find life stressful and fraught with anxiety.

I will conclude this module with a discussion on environmental and perceptual contexts of cross cultural communication in the next lecture.

For Further Reference

