

CROSS CULTURAL INTERACTION

18 THEMES

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A. PEOPLE'S INTENSE FEELINGS

1. anxiety
2. emotional experiences and disconfirmed expectancies
3. belonging
4. ambiguity
5. confronting prejudice and ethnocentrism

B. KNOWLEDGE AREAS

6. work
7. time and space
8. viewing language in a cross-cultural context
9. roles
10. importance of the group and importance of the individual
11. ritual and superstition
12. hierarchies among individuals
13. values: the integrating force in culture

C. BASES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

14. categorization
15. differentiation
16. the in-group-out-group distinction
17. learning styles
18. attribution

18 FACTORS WHICH CAN CREATE CROSS-CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS AND CONFLICTS

When working cross-culturally, there are a number of issues that will affect our own comfort, our ability to communicate clearly and meaningfully, and our capacity to resolve conflicts with those of the other culture. Cushner and Brislin, in their book Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide (SAGE publications, 1996), outlined 18 themes which have been central in the literature examining cross-cultural experiences. These 18 themes are grouped under three headings:

1. **People's Intense Feelings:** The 5 themes listed here are connected to people's comfort levels when they encounter new experiences and differences in others.
2. **Knowledge Areas:** The 8 themes listed here are related to cultural differences in determining what is appropriate and inappropriate in relationships with others.
3. **Bases of Cultural Differences:** The 5 themes listed here related to the different ways that people of different cultures respond to and organize information.

The following passages are from Cushner, Kenneth and Brislin, Richard W., Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide, Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1996, Pp. 39-42.

People's Intense Feelings

In adjusting to life and work within cultures other than their own, people are likely to experience a number of emotional reactions owing to feelings of displacement and unfamiliarity, and because of their status as outsiders.

- *Anxiety:* As people encounter many unfamiliar demands, they are likely to become anxious about whether or not their behavior is appropriate.
- *Disconfirmed expectations:* People may become upset or uncomfortable not because of the specific circumstances they encounter, but because their experiences in the other culture differ from what they had expected.
- *Belonging:* People have the need to fill a niche, to feel that they belong and are accepted by others, but they often cannot when interacting in another culture because they have the status of outsider.
- *Ambiguity:* In their own cultural contexts, people learn appropriate responses to a wide variety of social stimuli. When living and working across cultures, they may receive messages that are often unclear, yet they must still make decisions and take appropriate actions. People who are effective at working across cultures are known to have a high tolerance for ambiguity.
- *Confrontation with one's prejudices:* Part of socialization into a culture involves treating others who are noticeably different with reserve. People may discover that their previously held beliefs about certain groups may not be accurate or useful once they find themselves interacting with other cultures.

Knowledge Areas

Again and again, reports of people working in a variety of different cultures include difficulties and misunderstandings concerning a number of commonly mentioned topics. Our shorthand for these frequently discussed topics is *knowledge areas*, and because people are socialized within their own cultures to learn that certain things are appropriate, many specific cross-cultural differences exist within these areas. People about to live and work across cultures should realize that many potential misunderstandings abound in these knowledge areas.

- **Work:** Many people crossing cultures spend a great deal of time in various workplaces, whether these are schools, factories, offices, or social service agencies. Differences in the amounts of time people spend on task versus time spent socializing, who has the obligation of control, and the manner in which decisions are made are examples of differences that may occur in this area.
- **Time and spatial orientation:** Various attitudes exist regarding the importance of adhering to clock time in certain situations, as well as the proper spatial orientations people adopt with respect to one another during different interpersonal encounters. These important areas have been well examined in the seminal works of Edward Hall (1959, 1966).
- **Communication and language use:** Communication differences are probably the most obvious problem that must be overcome in the crossing of cultural boundaries. Cross-cultural verbal and nonverbal communication, attitudes toward language use, and the difficulties of learning another language as it is actually spoken rather than read from a book are part of this knowledge area.
- **Roles:** There are generally accepted sets of behaviors people perform in relation to the roles they adopt. Examples of roles include the family provider, the boss, the volunteer, and the leader. Tremendous differences may exist with respect to the occupants of such roles and how they are enacted in different cultures.
- **Importance of the group and the importance of the individual:** All people act at times in their individual interest and at other times according to their group allegiances. The relative emphasis on group versus individual orientation varies from culture to culture and may have a significant impact on people's decision-making processes, choices of peers and associates, and the degree to which they perform effectively on their own. Of all the differences found to exist between cultures, group versus individual orientation seems to be one of the most significant. Another set of terms frequently used in discussing this distinction is individualism/collectivism (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).
- **Rituals versus superstition:** All cultures have rituals that help people meet their needs as they cope with life's everyday demands. People in all cultures also engage in behaviors that outsiders may label superstitious. One culture's "intelligent practices" may be seen as another culture's rituals and superstition.
- **Hierarchies—class and status:** Whenever a large number of people have to interact frequently, leaders emerge and power becomes unevenly distributed.

One manifestation of the unequal access to power is the division of people into various social class groupings. People often make distinctions based on various markers of high and low status, and these distinctions differ from culture to culture.

- **Values:** As part of their socialization, people learn to accept as proper a small set of ideas within such broad areas as religion, economics, aesthetics, political organization, and interpersonal relationships. Such learning becomes internalized and affects attitudes, preferences, and views of what is desirable and undesirable. Understanding these internalized views, or values, is critical in cross-cultural adjustment.

Bases of Cultural Differences

People everywhere are bombarded with immense amounts of information every day, not all of which they can possibly give their full attention. Understanding the ways in which they respond to and organize this information, and then communicate the information to others, provides a great deal of insight into the cultural differences that people find puzzling as they try to adjust to life in other cultures.

- **Categorization:** Because they cannot attend to all pieces of information, people group bits of information into categories for more efficient organization. People in different cultures place the same individual elements into different categories (e.g., who is a friend, what a good worker does), causing confusion for people accustomed to any one given set of categories.
- **Differentiation:** Given that people become accustomed to one set of categories, they are likely to use those categories when faced with new information. One reason for the possible misuse of a category is that people in another culture may differentiate pieces of information, treating those pieces as if they were quite distinct. One result of increased interest in, or importance of, a certain knowledge area is that more and more information is differentiated within that area such that new categories are formed. Examples are types of obligations that accompany various kinship relations and the various ways to overcome red tape. If sojourners do not differentiate information in the same manner as hosts, they may be treated as naive or ignorant.
- **In-group/out-group distinction:** One of the major bases for forming categories about other people, and for differentiating information within those categories, is the ubiquitous tendency to form in-groups and out-groups. In-groups are made up of those people with whom interaction is sought. Out-group members are held at a distance and are often the targets of rejection. People the world over divide others into in-groups and out-groups. Those entering other cultures or new groups must recognize that they will often be considered out-group members and that there are some behaviors associated with in-group membership in which sojourners will never participate.
- **Learning styles:** Change and growth, as well as the possibility for self-improvement, involve new learning. Even though people desire change and improvement, the styles in which people learn best may differ from culture to culture. People involved in change efforts (e.g., teachers, social workers, technical assistance advisers) may find that information presented in ways attractive and efficient to them may be awkward to others and may not lead to desired outcomes.
- **Attribution:** People observe the behavior of others, and they also reflect upon their own behavior. Judgments about the causes of behavior are called *attributions*. The same behavior, such as a firm handshake and a pleasant chat with the newcomer to an organization, may be attributed to different underlying causes by the parties involved. The person offering the handshake may consider the greeting polite. The newcomer may label it insincere, especially if norms concerning the proper length of time for the chat differ according to people's cultural backgrounds. Because research on attribution is central to thinking about the culture assimilator in cross-cultural training, we have presented more information on this topic earlier in this chapter.