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Some Lessons from Intercultural Living and Communication

Steven Eliason

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Our Life in the Philippines

Many years ago, my wife and I chose to go to the Philippines as religious and social workers. We were young, full of hope, love and enthusiasm, ready to serve in a far off land. Hailing from cold and snow-bound Minnesota we were ill-prepared to live in the salubrious yet hot climate of the Philippines; it was indeed a challenging task! In addition, people looked significantly different, spoke an unfamiliar language and ate food we were not used to. Everything was “strange” but fortunately our God-given commitment to the people was very strong and this made it possible for us to make friends and live in the villages of the Philippines.

Decategorization

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William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim write, “Decategorization occurs when we communicate with strangers based on their individual characteristics, rather than the categories in which we place them... In order to effectively communicate with strangers we must understand their behavior, and in order to understand their behavior we must be able at least to suspend, or manage, our stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and prejudice.” (p.106)

Three Psychological Influences

We all enter the communication arena with three psycho-cultural influences: expectations, stereotypes and attitudes. Being aware of this will help us understand someone from another culture. Nurturing mindfulness of these latent influences explains much of the confusion one encounters in a cross cultural conversation.

Take Time to Understand What People are Saying!

During my first term of missionary service in the Philippines, it took about nine months to get to the point where I could understand most of what people were saying. After a year and a half I was comfortable using the language and couldn't be “sold” anymore, as my Filipino friends liked to say.

But I found that even though I understood most everything people were saying, I didn't know why they would say it. From my perspective some things were hurtful, careless, insensitive or at least confusing, most of which didn't match my understanding of the Filipinos' shame-based culture.

Language Learning

My language tutor was a local man named Simplicio Cabrera. We had a good relationship for most of the first term, with only a couple minor misunderstandings affecting the relationship. When I returned for my second term after four years away, I was happy to see that he was still alive and we had a joyful reunion. I was actually quite moved to see him, and told him that he was really my first friend in the Philippines. Non-verbally I could tell this made him happy, but his words in response hurt me a little.

Why Focus on Differences?

In all sincerity my tutor said that I was his *first friend of another race*. He seemed to emphasize the fact that we were different, a part of another group, which as an American made me feel like less of a friend. Why would he focus on our differences? Why wouldn't he just agree with me and affirm that I was his friend? Did this make his view of our relationship less personal or intimate than mine? That's what I interpreted it to mean.

Slowly but steadily, I realized that saying what he did merely reflected his tendency to look at people first as members of a group, and then as individuals. He understood himself in the context of his family and community, and that's how he came to know me, in the context being a foreigner and American. He had understandably failed at "deategorization," not viewing me based on my individual characteristics, but rather according to the categories in which he placed me. But I had failed to suspend my ethnocentric view of friendship and misinterpreted him.

Communication Problems

Communication was a major issue for both me and my wife; we were practitioners, not theoreticians. We did read some books on intercultural communication before we left for the Philippines, but these were not adequate! Our day to day life presented several unfamiliar problems and we had to find our own solutions to the immense communication differences we faced.

Today we have many interesting and informative books to read on how to communicate with strangers or how to communicate effectively in intercultural situations. But as I wrote above, we were not theoreticians, but practitioners on the field. William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim in their book *Communicating with Strangers* (2002) provide a framework to categorize the problems one may face in a foreign culture: "Given our view of communication, we see encoding and decoding of communication messages to be an interactive process influenced by conceptual filters, which we categorize into cultural, sociocultural, psycho-cultural and environmental factors." (p.32)

Cultural Factors

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In the first part of their book, Gudykunst and Kim identify and define communication and culture and the consequences of their interaction. For a religious and social worker who is concerned with communicating not only the Divine message but also knowledge of a secular nature, the factors of culture and environment provide definition for how this is done. Whatever the message we want to communicate, we should be aware of the influences that affect the “decoding” of this message by the listener.

A religious and social worker from a far off land is truly a “stranger,” one who is both near (in proximity) yet far (culturally) to the ones he serves.

Conceptual Filters

Gudykunst and Kim identify four conceptual filters which specify the areas one should study to improve quality of communication. The authors describe this communication awareness and progress towards competence as a 4-stage process:

1. Unconscious incompetence
2. Conscious incompetence
3. Conscious competence
4. Unconscious competence (p.26).

Begin with the Assumption of Ignorance

The application for those engaged in cross-cultural service means that one begins with the assumption of ignorance and therefore must engage people as one who wants to learn. This posture reflects the quality of humility any good student must possess. Within a Christian framework, this quality of humility is what Jesus demonstrated while he was engaged in cross-cultural communication. Beginning with this sort of attitude positions the social worker from a far off land at a place where he may progress towards competence and also have confidence that the message shared is actually communicating what ought to be said.

Verbal and Nonverbal

Gudykunst and Kim suggest, “While our verbal behaviors are mostly explicit and are processed cognitively, our nonverbal behaviors are spontaneous, ambiguous, often fleeting, and often beyond our conscious awareness and control.” (p.172)

Importance of Nonverbal Messages

In the communication process, regardless of the degree of cultural difference, nonverbal messages are normally the most significant. The Westerner is more prone to focus on verbal behavior, although even he is subject to the complications related to the nonverbal. It behooves the religious and social worker to begin paying close attention to the nonverbal communication patterns of the new culture. This attempt to understand the nonverbal rules even before the spoken language will assist one to truly understand the meaning of words. This is important because so much of any positive interaction is based on compliance with these rules.

Confusing Visual and Verbal Stimuli

Our first term of service in the Philippines was characterized by a flood of new and confusing visual and verbal stimuli. One of our first observations was that same gender displays of affection (including hand-holding, hugging and physical closeness) did not necessarily mean they were homosexuals. It took a few years, but as relationships were genuinely developed, I found that I could also show host-culture appropriate displays of affection and emotion; my tutor Simplicio was the first man I ever held hands with! This was so radically different than anything I’d experienced at home in the United States, that I found myself intentionally trying to do it in order to overcome my natural feelings about touching other men.

Weakness of Reliance upon Only Understanding Verbal Communication

Another demonstration of the weakness of reliance upon only understanding verbal communication occurred about nine months after arriving. The confusing part of this was that in spite of understanding their words, I couldn’t understand their reasoning because it was so different than my own. It wasn’t until I discovered more about the culture and some of the specific aspects of interpersonal communication (especially the nonverbal kind) that they made sense to me. Foreign for sure, but at least I understood why from their perspective.

Sympathy, Empathy and Ethnocentrism

We normally want to be sympathetic to the difficulties our friends and neighbors experience, and to develop and show our empathy in intercultural settings. But we need to know the implications of sympathy and empathy. Gudykunst and Kim suggest:

Sympathy, like ethnocentrism, uses our own frame of reference to interpret incoming stimuli...if we apply the Golden Rule in interactions with strangers we are being sympathetic because the referent is our own standard of appropriate behavior. Empathy...is the imaginative intellectual and emotional participation in another person's experience. The referent for empathy is not our own experience, but that of the stranger...an alternative to the Golden Rule, the Platinum Rule...involves empathy rather than sympathy: 'Do unto others as they themselves would have done to them.' (*Communicating with Strangers*, p.242)

Judge Not, That You Be Judged!

Indeed, we really need to step into the shoes of others and learn what sympathy and empathy from our side mean to them! On an emotive level, which is where sympathy and empathy are displayed, we can easily be mistaken about appropriateness. It is doubtful whether 'Do unto others as they themselves would have done to them' would indeed be right or beneficial to them on all occasions simply because we don't know what they expect. However the advice "Judge not, that you be judged" (Matthew 7:12) is very relevant here, simply so we continue to seek to understand their perspective which is the basis for their expectations.

Becoming Intercultural

There is an interesting statement by Gudykunst and Kim which needs to be critically examined:

The process of becoming intercultural is like climbing a high mountain. As we reach the mountaintop, we see that all paths below ultimately lead to the same summit and that each path presents unique scenery. In a way, becoming intercultural is a process of liberating ourselves from a limited perspective on life – of becoming more fully human,

with a greater awareness of and sensitivity to self, others, and the relationships between them. (p.255)

It is not clear what they mean by this first statement. Is this a claim that there are universal values embraced in all communities? Is this an appeal for a pluralistic worldview which believes all religions lead to the same Divine? What about the obvious differences and even contradictions between cultures?

However, the second part of the argument, “In a way, becoming intercultural is a process of liberating ourselves from a limited perspective on life – of becoming more fully human, with a greater awareness of and sensitivity to self, others, and the relationships between them” may be more easily accepted. Everyone is limited to their own experience, and appreciating and learning from what others have experienced makes one more able to communicate clearly.

Pluralism and Communication

If embracing pluralism is required to be an effective communicator, then how do we explain the oppression and exploitation of people by people who profess to follow and adore pluralistic ideologies? A suggestion was made to promote it through education (p.256), but to me it appears that the dictum to “love one another” is superior and would result in better understanding and more effective communication. There is a significant difference between understanding that someone has a different perception of reality and accepting that this perception is actually true, even if only for them.

Reference

William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim. *Communicating with Strangers*.
McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages; 4 edition (August 1, 2002)

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