



2nd Edition

Intercultural Communication

Globalization and Social Justice

Kathryn Sorrells

Chapter 1 Opening the Conversation Studying Intercultural Communication



What creates positive intercultural interactions?

© iStockphoto.com/monkeybusinessimages

Learning Objectives

1. Identify the opportunities and challenges of intercultural communication in the context of globalization.
2. Describe three definitions of culture that influence intercultural communication in the global context.
3. Explain how our social location and standpoint shape how we see, experience, and understand the world differently.
4. Describe the goals and six points of entry into intercultural praxis.

We, the people of the world—over 7 billion of us from different cultures—find our lives, our livelihoods, and our lifestyles increasingly interconnected and interdependent due to the forces of globalization. Since the early 1990s, changes in economic and political policies, governance, and institutions have combined with advances in communication and transportation technology to dramatically accelerate interaction and interrelationship among people from different cultures around the globe. Deeply rooted in European colonization and Western imperialism, the forces of this current wave of globalization have catapulted people from different cultures into shared physical and virtual spaces in homes, in relationships, in schools, in neighborhoods, in the workplace, and in political alliance and activism in unprecedented ways.

Today, advances in communication technology allow some of us to connect with the world on wireless devices sitting in the backyard or in our favorite café. While almost 40% of the world's people wake up each morning assured of instant communication with others around the globe (ITU World Telecommunication, 2014), about 50% of the world's population live below the internationally defined poverty line, starting their day without the basic necessities of food, clean water, and shelter (Global Issues, 2013). Through the Internet, satellite technology, and cell phones, many of the world's people have access to both mass media and personal accounts of events and experiences as they unfold around the globe. However, in this time of instant messages and global communication, about 775 million or one out of five young people and adults worldwide do not have the skills to read (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013). Today, advances in transportation technology bring families, friends, migrants, tourists, businesspeople, and strangers closer together more rapidly than ever before in the history of human interaction. Yet, some have the privilege to enjoy intercultural experiences through leisure, recreation, and tourism, while other people travel far from home and engage with others who are different from themselves out of economic necessity and basic survival.

People from different cultural backgrounds have been interacting with each other for many millennia. What makes intercultural communication in our current times different from other periods in history? The amount and intensity of intercultural interactions; the degree of intercultural interdependence; the patterns of movement of people, goods, and capital; and the conditions that shape and constrain our intercultural interactions distinguish our current context—the context of globalization—from other periods in history. Consider the following:

- About 232 million people live outside their country of origin (United Nations, 2013).
- U.S. cultural products and corporations—films, TV programs, music, and the iconic Barbie doll, as well as McDonalds, Walmart, Starbucks, and Disney—saturate the world's markets, transmitting cultural values, norms, and the “American” way of life as they dominate the global economy (Crothers, 2013).
- In the fallout and slow recovery from the 2008 economic crisis, the great backlash against globalization has arrived. Anti-immigrant, protectionist, and populist policies, often fueled by xenophobia and racism, are ushering in new forms of nationalism around the world (Roubini, 2014).
- WeChat or *Wēixìn* (微信), a text and voice messaging communication service developed in China by Tencent, connects nearly 400,000,000 users worldwide. With growing popularity outside of China, WeChat has approximately 100 million users in India, Indonesia, and Malaysia as well as Argentina, Brazil, Italy, and Mexico (Lim, 2014).
- The United States is projected to become a majority-minority nation for the first time in 2043. While the non-Hispanic White population will remain the largest single group, no group will make up a majority. Minorities, now 37% of the U.S. population, are projected to comprise 57% of the population in 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).
- “The world,” [Miami] Heat forward Shane Battier said, “is getting smaller every day.” The National

Basketball Association final series between the Miami Heat and the San Antonio Spurs aired in 215 countries. Commentary on the games appeared in 47 languages and social media attracted attention globally. Nine players on the 2014 NBA Championship team, the San Antonio Spurs, are international players (Reynolds, 2014).

- The gap between the wealthy and the poor is increasing within countries and around the world. The wealth of the world is divided in two with approximately 50% of the wealth attributed to the top 1%. Eighty-five of the richest people in the world have the combined wealth of 3.5 billion of the poorest people (Oxfam, 2014).
- In many instances, ethnic tension and open conflict between ethnic groups has intensified in the global context. For example, while ethnic and religious differences certainly play a role in conflicts in Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, Chechnya, Sudan, Burma, and China to name only a few, economic and political issues with deep historical dimensions are at the root of the conflicts (Cordell & Wolff, 2013).

Clearly, cultural interaction is occurring, and intercultural communication matters. The goal of this book is to position the study and practice of intercultural communication within the context of globalization, which then enables us to understand and grapple with the dynamic, creative, conflictive, and often inequitable nature of intercultural relations in the world. This book provides theories, conceptual maps, and practical tools to guide us in asking questions, making sense, and taking action in regard to the intercultural opportunities, misunderstandings, and conflicts that emerge today in the context of globalization. Throughout the book, intercultural communication is explored within this broader political, economic, and cultural context of globalization, which allows us to foreground the important roles that history, power, and global institutions—political, economic, and media institutions—currently play in intercultural communication.

This first chapter is called “Opening the Conversation” because the relationship between you, the readers, and me, the author, is a special kind of interaction. I start the conversation by introducing various definitions of culture that provide different ways to understand intercultural communication today. Then, some of the opportunities and challenges of studying intercultural communication are addressed by introducing positionality, standpoint theory, and ethnocentrism. This chapter ends with a discussion of intercultural praxis. As we “open the conversation,” I invite you to engage with me in an ongoing process of learning, reflecting, and critiquing what I have to say about intercultural communication and how it applies to your everyday experiences.

Definitions of Culture

Culture is a concept that we use often, yet we have a great deal of trouble defining. In the 1950s, anthropologists Clyde Kluckhohn and Arthur Kroeber (1952) identified over 150 definitions of culture. Culture is central to the way we view, experience, and engage with all aspects of our lives and the world around us. Thus, even our definitions of culture are shaped by the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts in which we live. Historically, the word *culture* was closely linked in its use and meaning to processes of colonization. In the 19th century, European anthropologists wrote detailed descriptions of the ways of life of “others,” generally characterizing non-European societies as less civilized, barbaric, “primitive,” and as lacking “culture.” These colonial accounts treated European culture as the norm and constructed Europe as superior by using the alleged lack of “culture” of non-European societies as justification for colonization. By the beginning of World War I, nine-tenths of the world had been colonized by European powers—a history of imperialism that continues to structure and impact intercultural communication today (Young, 2001).

With this assumption of the superiority of European culture, the categorization system that stratified groups of people was based on having “culture” or not, which, in turn, translated within European societies as “high” culture and “low” culture. Those in the elite class, or ruling class, who had power, were educated at prestigious schools, and were patrons of the arts, such as literature, opera, and ballet, embodied high culture. Those in the working class who enjoyed activities, such as popular theater, folk art, and “street” activities—and later movies and television—embodied low culture. We see remnants of these definitions of culture operating today. The notion of culture continues to be used in some situations to stratify groups based on the kinds of activities people engage in, thereby reinforcing beliefs about superior and inferior cultures. Over the past 50 years, struggles within academia and society in general have legitimized the practices and activities of common everyday people, leading to the use of the term popular culture to reference much of what was previously considered low culture. However, in advertising, in media representations, and in everyday actions and speech, we still see the use of high and low cultural symbols not only to signify class differences, but also to reinforce a cultural hierarchy. The growing and overwhelming appeal and consumption of U.S. culture around the world, which coincides with the superpower status of the United States, can be understood, at least partially, as a desire to be in proximity as well as have contact with the United States, and therefore to exhibit the signs of being “cultured.”

Anthropologic Definition: Culture as a Site of Shared Meaning

The traditional academic field of intercultural communication has been deeply impacted by anthropology. In fact, many of the scholars like Edward T. Hall (1959), who is considered the originator of the field of intercultural communication, were trained as anthropologists. In the 1950s, Edward T. Hall, along with others at the Foreign Service Institute, developed training programs on culture and communication for diplomats going abroad on assignment. Hall's applied approach, focusing on the micro-level of human interaction with particular attention to nonverbal communication and tacit or out-of-awareness levels of information exchange, established the foundation for the field of intercultural communication (Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002).

Clifford Geertz, another highly influential anthropologist, emphasized the pivotal role symbols play in understanding culture. According to Geertz, culture is a web of symbols that people use to create meaning and order in their lives. Concerned about the colonial and Western origins of anthropology, he highlighted the challenges of understanding and representing cultures accurately. Anthropologists engage in interpretive practices that, for Geertz, are best accomplished in conversation with people from within the culture. In his widely cited book, *Interpretation of Culture*, Geertz (1973) said culture "denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life" (p. 89).

Culture, then, from an anthropological perspective, is a system of shared meanings that are passed from generation to generation through symbols that allow human beings (not only men!) to communicate, maintain, and develop an approach and understanding of life. In other words, culture allows us to make sense of, express, and give meaning to our lives. Let's look more closely at the various elements of this definition.

At the core of this definition is the notion of symbols and symbol systems. Symbols stand for or represent other things. Words, images, people, ideas, and actions can all be symbols that represent other things. For example, the word *cat* is a set of symbols (the alphabet) that combine to represent both the idea of a cat and the actual cat. A handshake—whether firm or soft, simple or complex—a raised eyebrow, a hand gesturing "ok," a veil, a tie, or "bling" are all symbolic actions or things that carry meaning. An image or an object like the U.S. flag, the twin towers, a T-shirt that reads "Keep Calm and Party On," a cell phone, or graffiti are also symbols that stand for ideas, beliefs, and actions. How do we know what these and other symbols represent or what they mean? Are the meanings of symbols somehow inherent in the things themselves, or are meanings assigned to symbols by the people who use them? While the meaning of symbols may seem natural or inherent for those who use them, the anthropological definition that was previously offered indicates that it is the act of assigning similar meanings to symbols and the sharing of these assigned meanings that, at least partially, constitute culture.

The definition by Geertz (1973) also suggests that culture is a system. It is a system that is expressed through symbols that allow groups of people to communicate and to develop knowledge and understanding about life. When we say culture is a system, we mean that the elements of culture interrelate to form a whole. The shared symbols that convey or express meaning within a culture acquire meaning through their interrelation to each other and together create a system of meanings. Consider this example: As you read the brief scenario that follows, pay attention to what you are thinking and feeling.

Imagine a young man who is in his mid- to late 20s who works at a job making about \$70,000 a year. OK, what do you think and how do you feel about this man? Now, you find out that he is single. Have your thoughts or feelings changed? For you, and for the majority of students like you in the United States, the picture of this man and his life is looking pretty good. Generally, both female and male students from various cultural backgrounds in the classroom think and feel positively about him. Now you find out that he lives at home with his parents and siblings. Have your thoughts or feelings about him changed? Without fail, when this scenario is used in the classroom, an audible sigh of disappointment comes from students when they learn that he lives with his parents. What's going on here? How does this information contradict or challenge the system of meaning in the dominant U.S. culture that was being created up to that point? The image of this young man, who was looking so good,

suddenly plummets from desirable to highly suspect and, well, according to some students, “weird,” “strange,” and “not normal.” The dominant U.S. culture is a system of shared meanings that places high value and regard on individualism, independence, consumerism, and capitalism, which are symbolically represented through the interrelated elements of income, age, sex/gender, and in this case, living arrangements. Students in the classroom who ascribe to the dominant cultural value system ask questions like the following: Why would he want to live at home if he has all that money? Is he a momma’s boy? What’s his problem? Does he have low self-esteem? Others, operating from similar assumptions, suggest that he might be living at home in order to save money to buy a house of his own. In other words, he may be sacrificing his independence temporarily to achieve his ultimate (and of course, preferable) goal of living independently.

After the disappointment, disbelief, and concern for this poor fellow has settled down, I often hear alternative interpretations from students who come from different cultural backgrounds or who straddle multiple cultural systems of meaning-making. The students suggest that “he lives at home to take care of his parents,” or that “he likes living with his family,” or “maybe that’s just the way it’s done in that culture.” These students’ interpretations represent a different system of meaning-making that values a more collectivistic than individualistic orientation and a more interdependent than independent approach to life. The students who do speak up with these alternative interpretations may feel a bit ambivalent about stating their interpretation because they realize they are in the minority; yet, they have no problem making sense of the scenario. In other words, the scenario is not viewed as contradictory or inconsistent; rather, it makes sense. My purpose in giving this example at this point is to demonstrate the ways in which culture operates as a system of shared meanings. The example also illustrates how we—human beings—generally assume that the way we make sense of things and the way we give meaning to symbols is the “right,” “correct,” and often “superior” way. One of the goals in this book is to challenge these ethnocentric attitudes and to develop the ability to understand cultures from within their own frames of reference rather than interpreting and negatively evaluating other cultures from one’s own cultural position.

In summary, a central aspect of the anthropological definition of culture is that the patterns of meaning embodied in symbols that are inherited and passed along through generations are assumed to be shared. In fact, it is shared meaning that constitutes culture as a unit of examination in this definition of culture. The cultural studies definition of culture from a critical perspective offers another way to understand the complex notion of culture (see [Photo 1.1](#)).

Photo 1.1 Are the meanings associated with these images shared or contested within cultures and across cultures?



© iStockphoto.com/visual7

© iStockphoto.com/skynesher

© iStockphoto.com/mseidelch

© iStockphoto.com/shelma1

© iStockphoto.com/ Stephen Krow

© iStockphoto.com/AnderAguirre

Cultural Studies Definition: Culture as a Site of Contested Meaning

While traditional anthropological definitions focus on culture as a system of shared meanings, cultural studies perspectives, informed by Marxist theories of class struggle and exploitation, view culture as a site of contestation where meanings are constantly negotiated (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992). Cultural studies is a transdisciplinary field of study that emerged in the post–World War II era in England as a challenge to the positivist approaches to the study of culture, which purported to approach culture “objectively.” The goals of Richard Hoggart, who founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and others who followed, such as Stuart Hall, are to develop subjective approaches to the study of culture in everyday life, to examine the broader historical and political context within which cultural practices are situated, and to attend to relations of power in understanding culture. Simon During (1999) suggested that as England’s working class became more affluent and fragmented in the 1950s, as mass-mediated culture began to dominate over local, community cultures, and as the logic that separated culture from politics was challenged, the old notion of culture as a shared way of life was no longer descriptive or functional.

Through a cultural studies lens, then, the notion of culture shifts from an expression of local communal lives to a view of culture as an apparatus of power within a larger system of domination. A cultural studies perspective reveals how culture operates as a form of hegemony, or domination through consent, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist theorist. Hegemony is dominance without the need for force or explicit forms of coercion. In other words, hegemony operates when the goals, ideas, and interests of the ruling group or class are so thoroughly normalized, institutionalized, and accepted that people consent to their own domination, subordination, and exploitation. Developments in cultural studies from the 1980s forward focus on the potential individuals and groups have to challenge, resist, and transform meanings in their subjective, everyday lives. John Fiske (1992) stated, “The social order constrains and oppresses people, but at the same time offers them resources to fight against those constraints” (p. 157), suggesting that individuals and groups are both consumers and producers of cultural meanings and not passive recipients of meanings manufactured by cultural industries. From a cultural studies perspective, meanings are not necessarily shared, stable, or determined; rather, meanings are constantly produced, challenged, and negotiated.

Consider, for example, the images of nondominant groups in the United States, such as African American; Latino/Latina; Asian American; American Indian; Arab American; or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Nondominant groups are often underrepresented and represented stereotypically in the mass media leading to struggles to affirm positive identities and efforts to claim and reclaim a position of respect in society. When any of us—from dominant or nondominant groups—speak or act outside the “norm” established by society or what is seen as “normal” within our cultural group, we likely experience tension, admonition, or in more extreme cases, shunning. As we engage with media representations and confront expected norms, we challenge and negotiate shared and accepted meanings within culture and society. Meanings associated with being an African American, a White man, or Latino/Latina are not shared by all in the society; rather, these meanings are continuously asserted, challenged, negotiated, and rearticulated. From a cultural studies perspective, meanings are continually produced, hybridized, and reproduced in an ongoing struggle of power (Hall, 1997a). Culture, then, is the “actual, grounded terrain” of everyday practices—watching TV, consuming and wearing clothes, eating fast food or dining out, listening to music or radio talk shows—and representations—movies, songs, videos, advertisements, magazines, and “news”—where meanings are contested.

While older definitions of culture where a set of things or activities signify high or low culture still circulate, the cultural studies notion of culture focuses on the struggles over meanings that are part of our everyday lives. Undoubtedly, the logic of understanding culture as a contested site or zone where meanings are negotiated appeals to and makes sense for people who experience themselves as marginalized from or marginalized within the centers of power, whether this is based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality. Similarly, the logic of understanding culture as a system of shared meanings appeals to and makes sense for people at the centers of power or in a dominant role, whether this position is based on race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality. This, itself, illustrates the struggle over the meaning of the notion of culture.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that we all participate in and are constrained by oppressive social forces. We all, at some points in our lives and to varying degrees, also challenge and struggle with dominant or preferred meanings. From a cultural studies perspective, culture is a site of analysis—in other words, something we need to attend to and critique. Culture is also a site of intervention, where we can work toward greater equity and justice in our lives and in the world in the ongoing struggle of domination and resistance.

The initial aim of the transdisciplinary field of cultural studies to critique social inequalities and work toward social change remains today; however, the academic field of cultural studies as it has traveled from England to Latin America, Australia, the United States, and other places has taken on different forms and emphases. In the mid-1980s, communication scholar Larry Grossberg (1986) identified the emerging and significant impact cultural studies began to have in the United States, particularly in the communication discipline. Today, as we explore intercultural communication within the context of globalization, a cultural studies approach offers tools to analyze power relations, to understand the historical and political context of our intercultural relations, and to see how we can act or intervene critically and creatively in our everyday lives.

Globalization Definition: Culture as a Resource

Influenced by cultural studies, contemporary anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) suggested in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* that we need to move away from thinking of culture as a thing, a substance, or an object that is shared. The concept of culture as a coherent, stable entity privileges certain forms of sharing and agreement and neglects the realities of inequality, difference, and those who are marginalized. He argued that the adjective *cultural* is more descriptive and useful than the noun *culture*. Consequently, focusing on the cultural dimensions of an object, issue, practice, or ideology is to recognize differences, contrasts, and comparisons. Culture, in the context of globalization, is not something that individuals or groups possess, but rather a way of referring to dimensions of situated and embodied difference that express and mobilize group identities (Appadurai, 1996).

George Yúdice (2003) suggested that culture in the age of globalization has come to be understood as a resource. Culture plays a greater role today than ever before because of the ways it is linked to community, national, international, and transnational economies and politics. In the first decades of the 21st century, culture is now seen as a resource for economic and political exploitation, agency, and power to be used or instrumentalized for a wide range of purposes and ends. For example, in the context of globalization, culture, in the form of symbolic goods, such as TV shows, movies, music, and tourism, is increasingly a resource for economic growth in global trade. Mass culture industries in the United States are a major contributor to the gross national product (GNP) and function globally as purveyors of U.S. cultural power (Crothers, 2013). Culture is also targeted for exploitation by capital in the media, consumerism, and tourism. Consider how products are modified and marketed to different cultural groups; how African American urban culture has been appropriated, exploited, commodified, and yet it operates as a potentially oppositional site; or how tourism in many parts of the world uses the resource of culture to attract foreign capital for development. While the commodification of culture—the turning of culture, cultural practices, and cultural space into products for sale—is not new, the extent to which culture is “managed” as a resource for its capital-generating potential and as a “critical sphere for investment” by global institutions like the World Bank (WB) is new (Yúdice, 2003, p. 13).

Culture, in the context of globalization, is conceptualized, experienced, exploited, and mobilized as a resource. In addition to being invested in and distributed as a resource for economic development and capital accumulation, culture is used as a resource to address and solve social problems, such as illiteracy, addiction, crime, and conflict. Culture is also used today discursively, socially, and politically as a resource for collective and individual empowerment, agency, and resistance. Groups of people in proximity to each other or vastly distant due to migration organize collective identities that serve as “homes” of familiarity; spaces of belonging; and as sites for the formation of resistance, agency, and political empowerment. Consider how over twenty years, the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB), an organization of indigenous Mixteco and Zapoteco immigrants from Oaxaca, Mexico, has become a transnational network where indigenous people re-claim indigenous forms of knowledge and cultural practices to resist discrimination, reframe colonization, and re-invent their cultural identities (Mercado, 2016). Or, consider how hip hop culture—transplanted and refashioned around the globe—uses music, dance, style, and knowledge to give voice to the silenced, challenge discrimination, and create platforms for activism that support cultural empowerment. Today, in the context of globalization “the understanding and practice of culture is quite complex, located at the intersection of economic and social justice agendas” (Yúdice, 2003, p. 17).

As you can see from our previous discussion, there are various and different definitions of culture. The concept of culture, itself, is *contested*. This means that there is no one agreed on definition, that the different meanings of culture can be understood as being in competition with each other for usage, and that there are material and symbolic consequences or implications attached to the use of one or another of the definitions. The definitions presented here—(1) culture as shared meaning, (2) culture as contested meaning, and (3) culture as resource—all offer important and useful ways of understanding culture in the context of globalization. Throughout the book, all three definitions are used to help us make sense of the complex and contradictory intercultural communication issues and experiences we live and struggle with today.



Communicative Dimensions Communication and Culture

What is the relationship between communication and culture? The three different approaches to culture illustrate different assumptions about communication.

According to the *anthropological definition* of culture as a shared system of meaning, communication is a process of transmitting and sharing information among a group of people. In this case, communication enables culture to be co-constructed and mutually shared by members of a group.

In the *cultural studies definition*, culture is a contested site of meaning. According to this view, communication is a process through which individuals and groups negotiate and struggle over the “agreed on” and “appropriate” meanings assigned to reality. Through verbal and nonverbal communication as well as the use of rhetoric, some views are privileged and normalized while other perspectives are marginalized or silenced. Thus, communication is a process of negotiation, a struggle for power and visibility rather than a mutual construction and sharing of meaning.

Finally, in the *globalization definition*, culture is viewed as a resource. In this case, communication can be viewed as a productive process that enables change. We usually associate the word *productive* with positive qualities. However, “productive” here simply means that communication is a generative process. People leverage culture to build collective identities and exploit or mobilize for personal, economic, or political gain. Communication is a process of using cultural resources.

Studying Intercultural Communication

In recent years, when I ask students to speak about their culture, many find it a highly challenging exercise. For students who come from the dominant culture, the response is often “I don’t really have a culture.” For those students from nondominant groups, responses that point to their ethnic, racial, or religious group identification come more readily; however, their replies are often accompanied by some uneasiness. Typically, people whose culture differs from the dominant group have a stronger sense of their culture and develop a clearer awareness of their cultural identity earlier in life than those in the dominant group.

Cultural identity is defined as our situated sense of self that is shaped by our cultural experiences and social locations. Our identities develop through our relationships with others—our families, our friends, and those we see as outside our group. Our cultural identities are constructed from the languages we speak, the stories we tell, as well as the norms, behaviors, rituals, and nonverbal communication we enact. Histories passed along from within our cultural group in addition to representations of our group by others also shape our cultural identities. Our cultural identities serve to bond us with others giving us a sense of belonging; cultural identities also provide a buffer protecting us from others we or our group see as different from ourselves; and cultural identities can also function as bridges connecting us to others who are viewed as different. Our cultural identities intersect with and are impacted by our other social identities, including our ethnic, racial, gender, class, age, religious, and national identities. In the context of globalization, our identities are not fixed; rather, our identities are complex, multifaceted, and fluid.

What definitions of culture do you think are operating in the minds of my students when asked to speak about their culture? How might their cultural identities—consciously or unconsciously—affect their understanding of culture? What accounts for the different responses among students from dominant and nondominant cultures? We can see how the anthropological definition of culture as shared meaning and culture as something that groups possess is presumed in the students’ responses. Students who identify with U.S. dominant culture are encouraged to see themselves as “individuals,” which often underlies their claim that they “have no culture.” Since their culture is pervasive and “normal” in the United States, European American or White students don’t recognize the language, stories, values, norms, practices, and shared views on history as belonging to a culture. While students in nondominant groups see themselves as having culture or a cultural identity based on the ways in which they are different from the dominant group, dominant group members see the difference of nondominant groups and label it “culture,” and their own seeming lack of “difference” as not having culture. While the dominant culture is also infused with “difference,” it is not as evident because the cultural patterns of the dominant group are the norm.

Additionally, we can see how those from the dominant culture understand culture as a resource, which others have, but which they, rather nostalgically, are lacking. Interestingly and importantly, the fact that people from the dominant group do not see their culture as a resource is highly problematic. When members of the dominant group do not recognize their culture as a resource, their knowledge and access to cultural privilege and White privilege are erased and invisibilized by and for the dominant group (Frankenberg, 1993; Nakayama & Martin, 1999). We can also see the cultural studies definition of culture as contested meaning manifested in the differences between these students’ responses.

To a great extent, culture or cultural dimensions of human interaction are unconsciously acquired and embodied through interaction and engagement with others from one’s own culture. When one’s culture differs from the dominant group (e.g., people who are Jewish, Muslim, or Buddhist in a predominantly Christian society, or people who identify as African American, Asian American, Latino/Latina, Arab American, or Native American within the predominantly White or European American culture) then he or she is regularly, perhaps even on a daily basis, reminded of the differences between his or her own cultural values, norms, history, and possibly language and those of the dominant group. In effect, people from nondominant groups learn to “commute” between cultures, switching verbal and nonverbal cultural codes as well as values and ways of viewing the world as they move between two cultures. If you are from a nondominant group, the ways in which the dominant culture is different from your own are evident.

This phenomenon is certainly not unique to the United States. People of Algerian or Vietnamese background who are French, people who are Korean or Korean–Japanese in Japan, or people of Indian ancestry who have lived, perhaps for generations, in Africa, the Caribbean, or South Pacific Islands are likely to experience a heightened sense of culture and cultural identification because their differences from the dominant group are seen as significant, are pointed out, and are part of their lived experience. Cultural identities serve as a place of belonging with others who are similar and a buffer from those who perceive you and are perceived as different.

On the other hand, people from the dominant cultural group in a society are often unaware that the norms, values, practices, and institutions of the society are, in fact, deeply shaped by and infused with a particular cultural orientation and that these patterns of shared meaning have been normalized as “just the way things are” or “the way things should be.” So, to return to our earlier question, what accounts for the differences in responses of my students when asked about their culture?

Positionality

The differences in responses can be understood to some extent based on differences in students' positionality. Positionality refers to one's social location or position within an intersecting web of socially constructed hierarchical categories, such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, and physical abilities, to name a few. Different experiences, understanding, and knowledge of oneself and the world are gained, accessed, and produced based on one's positionality. Positionality is a relational concept. In other words, when we consider positionality, we are thinking about how we are positioned in relation to others within these intersecting social categories and how we are positioned in terms of power. The socially constructed categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, and ableness are hierarchical systems that often connote and confer material and symbolic power. At this point, consider how your positionality—your positions of power in relation to the categories of race, gender, class, nationality, and so on—impacts your experiences, understanding, and knowledge about yourself and the world around you. How does your positionality impact your intercultural communication interactions?

Standpoint Theory

The idea of positionality is closely related to standpoint theory (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1991; Hartsock, 1983) as proposed by feminist theorists. A standpoint is a place from which to view and make sense of the world around us. Our standpoint influences what we see and what we cannot, do not, or choose not to see. Feminist standpoint theory claims that the social groups to which we belong shape what we know and how we communicate (Wood, 2005). The theory is derived from the Marxist position that economically oppressed classes can access knowledge unavailable to the socially privileged and can generate distinctive accounts, particularly knowledge about social relations. For example, German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, writing in the early 19th century, suggested that while society in general may acknowledge the existence of slavery, the perception, experience, and knowledge of slavery is quite different for slaves as compared to masters. One's position within social relations of power produces different standpoints from which to view, experience, act, and construct knowledge about the world.

All standpoints are necessarily partial and limited, yet feminist theorists argue that people from oppressed or subordinated groups must understand both their own perspective and the perspective of those in power in order to survive. Therefore, the standpoint of marginalized people or groups, those with less power, is unique and should be privileged as it allows for a fuller and more comprehensive view. Patricia Hill Collins's (1986) notion of "outsiders within" points to the possibility of dual vision of marginalized people and groups, which in her case was that of a Black woman in predominantly White institutions. On the other hand, people in the dominant group, whether due to gender, class, race, religion, nationality, or sexual orientation, do not need to understand the viewpoint of subordinated groups and often have a vested interest in not understanding the positions of subordinated others in order to maintain their own dominance. As put forth by feminist theorists, standpoint theory is centrally concerned with the relationship between power and knowledge and sees the vantage point of those who are subordinated as a position of insight from which to challenge and oppose systems of oppression.

Standpoint theory offers a powerful lens through which to make sense of, address, and act on issues and challenges in intercultural communication. It enables us to understand the following:

- We may see, experience, and understand the world quite differently based on our different standpoints and positionalities.
- Knowledge about ourselves and others is situated and partial.
- Knowledge is always and inevitably connected to power.
- Oppositional standpoints can form, challenging and contesting the status quo.

Ethnocentrism

The application of standpoint theory and an understanding of the various positionalities we occupy may also assist us in avoiding the negative effects of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is derived from two Greek words: (1) *ethno*, meaning group or nation, and (2) *kentron*, meaning center, referring to a view that places one's group at the center of the world. As first conceptualized by William Sumner (1906), ethnocentrism is the idea that one's own group's way of thinking, being, and acting in the world is superior to others. Some scholars argue that ethnocentrism has been a central feature in all cultures throughout history and has served as a mechanism of cultural cohesion and preservation (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997); yet, the globalized context in which we live today makes ethnocentrism and ethnocentric approaches extremely problematic. The assumption that one's own group is superior to others leads to negative evaluations of others and can result in dehumanization, legitimization of prejudices, discrimination, conflict, and violence. Both historically and today, ethnocentrism has combined with power—material, institutional, and symbolic—to justify colonization, imperialism, oppression, war, and ethnic cleaning.

One of the dangers of ethnocentrism is that it can blind individuals, groups, and even nations to the benefits of broader points of view and perceptions. Ethnocentrism is often marked by an intensely inward-looking and often nearsighted view of the world. On an interpersonal level, if you think your group's way of doing things, seeing things, and believing about things is the right way and the better way, you are likely to judge others negatively and respond arrogantly and dismissively to those who are different from you. These attitudes and actions will likely end any effective intercultural communication and deprive you of the benefits of other ways of seeing and acting in the world. If you are in a position of greater power in relation to the other person, you may feel as if it doesn't matter and you don't really need that person's perspective. From this, we can see how ethnocentrism combines with power to increase the likelihood of a more insular, myopic perspective.

On a global scale, ethnocentrism can affect perceptions of one's own group and can lead to ignorance, misunderstandings, resentment, and potentially violence. In late December 2001, the *International Herald Tribune* reported the results of a poll of 275 global opinion leaders from 24 countries. "Asked if many or most people would consider US policies to be 'a major cause' of the September 11 attacks, 58 percent of the non-US respondents said they did, compared to just 18 percent of Americans" (*Global Poll*, 2001). According to the report, findings from the poll indicate "that much of the world views the attacks as a symptom of increasingly bitter polarization between haves and have-nots." In response to the question of how there can be such a difference in perception between what Americans think about themselves and what non-Americans think about Americans, authors Ziauddin Sardar and Meryl Wyn Davies (2002) suggested the following:

Most Americans are simply not aware of the impact of their culture and their government's policies on the rest of the world. But, more important, a vast majority simply do not believe that America has done, or can do, anything wrong. (p. 9)

Being a student of intercultural communication at this point in history presents unique opportunities and challenges. The increasing diversity of cultures in educational settings, workplaces, entertainment venues, and communities provides an impetus and resource for gaining knowledge and alternative perspectives about cultures that are different from one's own. The accelerated interconnectedness and interdependence of economics, politics, media, and culture around the globe also can motivate people to learn from and about others. Yet, for those positioned in the United States, rhetoric proclaiming the United States as the greatest and most powerful nation on Earth can combine with an unwillingness to critically examine the role of the United States in global economic and political instability and injustice. This can result in highly problematic, disturbing, and destructive forms of ethnocentrism that harm and inhibit intercultural communication and global intercultural relations. Ethnocentrism can lead to one-sided perceptions as well as extremely arrogant and misinformed views that are quite disparate from the perceptions of other cultural and national positions, and dangerously limit knowledge of the bigger global picture in which our intercultural communication and interactions take place.

Positionality, standpoint, and ethnocentric views are closely tied to our cultural identities. Our identities, based on socially constructed categories of difference (i.e., middle class, White male, American citizen), also position us in relation to others. Our positionality gives us a particular standpoint (i.e. “in American society, anyone can become successful if they work hard”) and ethnocentric views may emerge (i.e., “American culture is more advanced and civilized than other cultures”) if we have a limited understanding of others’ positionalities and standpoints. When cultural identity is understood as a situated sense of self, we see how our positionality is not neutral, our standpoint is never universal, and our ethnocentric views are always problematic.

The study and practice of intercultural communication inevitably challenge our assumptions and views of the world. In fact, one of the main benefits of intercultural communication is the way in which it broadens and deepens our understanding of the world we live in by challenging our taken-for-granted beliefs and views and by providing alternative ways to live fully and respectfully as human beings. Ethnocentrism may provide temporary protection from views, experiences, and realities that threaten one’s own, but it has no long-term benefits for effective or successful intercultural communication in the context of globalization.

Intercultural Praxis in the Context of Globalization

One of my goals in this book is to introduce and develop a process of critical reflective thinking and acting—what I call intercultural praxis—that enables us to navigate the complex and challenging intercultural spaces we inhabit interpersonally, communally, and globally. I hope that by reading this book you not only learn “about” intercultural communication, but also practice a way of being, thinking, analyzing, reflecting, and acting in the world in regard to cultural differences. Differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, and nationality are real. Differences manifest in language, dress, behaviors, attitudes, values, histories, and worldviews. When people from diverse backgrounds come together, differences exist. Yet, the challenge in intercultural communication is not only about cultural differences; differences that are always and inevitably situated within relations of power. Thus, a central intention of the intercultural praxis model is to understand and address the intersection of cultural differences and hierarchies of power in intercultural interactions.

All moments in your day—when you are interacting with friends, coworkers, teachers, bosses, and strangers; when you are consuming pop culture in the form of music, clothes, your favorite TV shows, movies, and other entertainment; when you hear and read news and information from the media and other outlets; and in your routines of what and where you eat, where you live, how and where you travel around—are all opportunities to engage in intercultural praxis. To begin to understand intercultural praxis, I offer six interrelated points of entry into the process: (1) inquiry, (2) framing, (3) positioning, (4) dialogue, (5) reflection, and (6) action.

The purpose of engaging in intercultural praxis is to raise our awareness, increase our critical analysis, and develop our socially responsible action in regard to our intercultural interactions in the context of globalization. The intercultural praxis model provides a blueprint for joining our knowledge and skills as intercultural communicators with our ability to act in the world to create greater equity and social justice. Education scholars Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin (2007) defined social justice as both a goal and process in their book *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*: “The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 1). Social justice includes a vision of the equitable distribution of resources where social actors experience agency with and responsibility for others. The process of reaching the goal of social justice should be “democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change” (Adams et al., p. 3).

The six points or ports of entry in the intercultural praxis model direct us toward ways of thinking, reflecting, and acting in relation to our intercultural experiences, allowing us to attend to the complex, relational, interconnected, and often ambiguous nature of our experiences. All six ports of entry into intercultural praxis are interconnected and interrelated. As we foreground each one individually, keep the others in your mind and consider how they inform the foregrounded port of entry. The six points of entry into intercultural praxis are introduced here and developed in greater depth through subsequent chapters (see [Figure 1.1](#)).

Inquiry

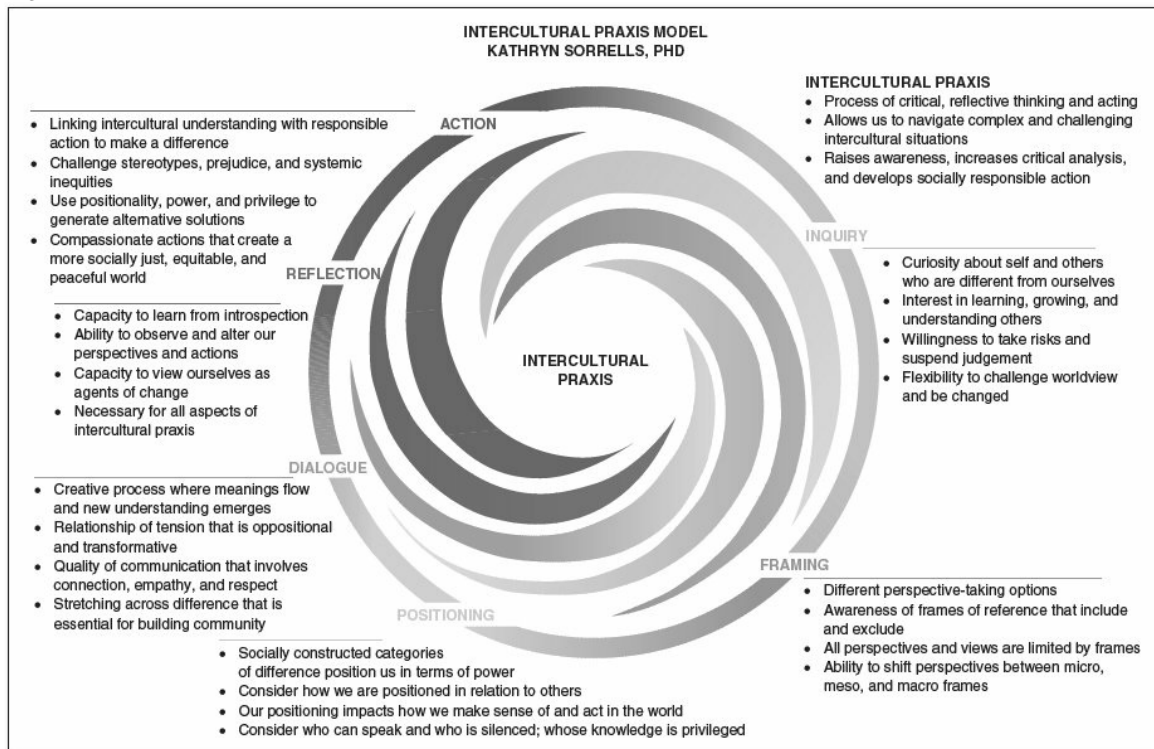
Inquiry, as a port of entry for intercultural praxis, refers to a desire and willingness to know, to ask, to find out, and to learn. Curious inquiry about those who are different from ourselves leads us to engagement with others. While it may sound simple, inquiry also requires that we are willing to take risks, allow our own way of viewing and being in the world to be challenged and perhaps changed, and that we are willing to suspend judgments about others in order to see and interpret others and the world from different points of view. A Vietnamese American student, Quynh Tran, recounted an intercultural experience she had before enrolling in one of my intercultural classes. When being introduced in a business setting to a man she did not know, she extended her hand to shake his. He responded that it was against his culture and religion to shake hands. She remembers feeling rather put off and offended by his response, deciding without saying anything that she was not interested in talking or working with him!

Reflecting on this incident in class, she realized that she missed an incredible opportunity to learn more about someone who was different from herself. She realized that if she could have let go of her judgments about those who were different and had not reacted to the man's statement as "weird, strange, or unfriendly," she may have been able to learn something and expand her knowledge of the world. She regretted not stepping through one of the doors of entry into intercultural praxis. Yet, by entering into reflection, she learned from this experience that inquiry, curiosity, a willingness to suspend judgment, and a desire to learn from others can be tremendously rewarding and informing. She could also see that what she reacted to as "weird" and "strange" was framed by her culture and positionality.

Framing

I propose framing to suggest a range of different perspective-taking options that we can learn to make available to ourselves and need to be aware of in intercultural praxis. First, the concept and action of “framing” connotes that frames always and inevitably limit our perspectives and our views on ourselves, others, and the world around us. We see things through individual, cultural, national, and regional frames or lenses that necessarily include some things and exclude others. As we engage in intercultural praxis, it is critical that we become aware of the frames of reference from which we view and experience the world.

Figure 1.1 Intercultural Praxis Model



Source: © Kathryn Sorrells

Design: Jessica Arana (www.jessicaarana.com)

Secondly, “framing” means that we are aware of both the local and global contexts that shape intercultural interactions. Sometimes it is very important to narrow the frame, to zoom in, and focus on the particular and very situated aspects of an interaction, event, or exchange. Take, for example, a conflict between two people from different cultures. It’s important to look at the micro-level differences in communication styles, how nonverbal communication may be used differently, the ways in which the two people may perceive their identities differently based on cultural belonging, and the ways in which the two may have learned to enact conflict differently based on their enculturation. However, in order to fully understand the particular intercultural interaction or misunderstanding, it is also necessary to back up to view the incident, event, or interaction from a broader frame. As we zoom out, we may see a history of conflict and misunderstanding between the two groups that the individuals represent; we may observe historical and/or current patterns of inequities between the two groups that position them differently; and we may also be able to map out broader geopolitical, global relations of power that can shed light on the particular and situated intercultural interaction, misunderstanding, or conflict. As we zoom in and foreground the micro-level of intercultural communication, we need to keep the wider background frame

in mind as it provides the context in which meaning about the particular is made. Similarly, as we zoom out and look at larger macro-level dimensions, we need to keep in mind the particular local and situated lived experience of people in their everyday lives. “Framing” as a port of entry into intercultural praxis means we are aware of our frames of reference. It also means we develop our capacity to flexibly and consciously shift our perspective from the particular, situated dimensions of intercultural communication to the broader global dimensions, and from the global dimensions to the particular while maintaining our awareness of both.

Positioning

Where are you positioned as you read this sentence? Your first response may be to say you are lounging in a chair at home, in a café, in the break room at work, or in the library. If you “zoomed out” utilizing the framing strategy in the previous discussion, you may also respond by stating your location in a part of a neighborhood, city, state, nation, or region of the world. Positioning as a point of entry into intercultural praxis invites us to consider how our geographic positioning is related to social and political positions. As you read these sentences, where are you positioned socioculturally? The globe we inhabit is stratified by socially constructed hierarchical categories based on culture, race, class, gender, nationality, religion, age, and physical abilities among others. Like the lines of longitude and latitude that divide, map, and position us geographically on the earth, these hierarchical categories position us socially, politically, and materially in relation to each other and in relation to power.

Understanding how and where we are positioned in the world—the locations from which we speak, listen, act, think, and make sense of the world—allows us to acknowledge that we, as human beings, are positioned differently with both material and symbolic consequences. It is also important to note that your positionality may shift and change based on where you are and with whom you are communicating. For example, it could vary over the course of a day, from occupying a relatively powerful position at home as the oldest son in a family to having to occupy a less powerful positionality in your part-time job as a personal assistant. Sometimes the shift may be even more drastic, as in the case of someone who is a doctor and part of a dominant group in her home culture and then shifts class and power positions when she is forced to migrate to the United States for political reasons. She finds herself not only part of a minority group, but also positioned very differently when her medical degree is not recognized, forcing her into more manual work and part-time student positionalities.

Positioning, as a way to enter into intercultural praxis, also directs us to interrogate who can speak and who is silenced; whose language is spoken and whose language is trivialized or denied; whose actions have the power to shape and impact others, and whose actions are dismissed, unreported, and marginalized. Positioning combines with other points of entry, such as inquiry and framing encouraging us to question whose knowledge is privileged, authorized, and agreed on as true and whose knowledge is deemed unworthy, “primitive,” or unnecessary. Positioning ourselves, others, and our knowledge of both self and others allow us to see the relationship between power and what we think of as “knowledge.” Our knowledge of the world—whether knowledge of meridians of longitude and latitude or hierarchical categories of race, class, and gender—is socially and historically constructed and produced in relation to power.

Intercultural Praxis Negotiating Differences

To begin using the Intercultural Praxis model as a tool for navigating the complexities of cultural differences and power differences in intercultural situations, read the following statements and consider your response to each. On a continuum, do you strongly agree with the statement, disagree, or is your response somewhere in between?

1. Hard work is all it takes for me to succeed in school, work, and life.
2. Big cities are generally not safe and people are not as friendly there.
3. In the United States, women are treated fairly and as equals to men.
4. The police are viewed with suspicion in my neighborhood.
5. Going to college/university is my primary responsibility.
6. Gay marriage is legalized in many states, so homophobia is increasingly a problem of the past.
7. Religious freedom is what makes the United States a great country.
8. I have to work twice as hard to prove I am as capable and competent as others.
9. For the most part, I can go pretty much anywhere in my city, town, or region without feeling afraid for my safety.
10. Interracial and intercultural relationships cause problems. People should stay with their own kind.
11. I am one of the only ones in my family who has the opportunity to go to college/university.
12. Since the United States has a Black president, the country has basically moved beyond racism.
13. I can get financial support from my family to pay for college/university, if necessary.

Now that you have read the statements, consider the following:

- How do your cultural frames inform your responses?
- How are your responses related to your positionality?
- How do cultural frames and positionality intersect to shape your responses?
- Share these statements with a friend, partner, or coworker and then dialogue about how your responses may be similar or different.
- Reflect and dialogue with the other person about how our differences in terms of power and positionality impact our standpoints.
- Reflect on the assumptions and judgments you may have about people who would make each of these statements.
- How is dialogue with people who are different in terms of culture and positionality a step toward creating a more equitable and just world?

Dialogue

While we have all heard of dialogue and likely assume that we engage in it regularly, it's useful to consider the derivation of the word to deepen our understanding of dialogue as an entry port into intercultural praxis. A common mistake is to think "dia" means two and dialogue, then, is conversation between two people. However, the word *dialogue* is derived from the Greek word *dialogos*. *Dia* means "through," "between," or "across," and *logos* refers to "word" or "the meaning of the word" as well as "speech" or "thought." Physicist and philosopher David Bohm (1996) wrote the following:

The picture or the image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge a new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. (p. 6)

Anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano (1990) suggested that "dialogue" necessarily entails both an oppositional as well as a transformative dimension. Given the differences in power and positionality in intercultural interactions, engagement in dialogue is necessarily a relationship of tension that "is conceived as a crossing, a reaching across, a sharing if not a common ground of understanding. . ." (p. 277).

According to philosopher Martin Buber, dialogue is essential for building community and goes far beyond an exchange of messages. For Buber, dialogue requires a particular quality of communication that involves a connection among participants who are potentially changed by each other. Buber refers to such relationships as I–Thou, where one relates and experiences another as a person. This relationship is quite different from an I–It relationship where people are regarded as objects and experienced as a means to a goal. Dialogue occurs only when there is regard for both self and other and where either/or thinking is challenged allowing for the possibility of shared ground, new meaning, and mutual understanding.

Dialogue offers a critical point of entry into intercultural praxis. Cognizant of differences in cultural frames and positionalities as well as the tensions that emerge from these differences, the process of dialogue invites us to stretch ourselves—to reach across—to imagine, experience, and creatively engage with points of view, ways of thinking and being, and beliefs different from our own while accepting that we may not fully understand or come to a common agreement or position.

Reflection

While cultures around the world differ in the degree to which they value reflection and the ways in which they practice reflection, the capacity to learn from introspection, to observe oneself in relation to others, and to alter one's perspectives and actions based on reflection is a capacity shared by all humans. Many cultures, including the dominant culture of the United States, place a high value on doing activities and accomplishing tasks, which often leaves little space and time for reflection. However, reflection is a key feature of intercultural praxis. Consider how reflection is central to the other points of entry into intercultural praxis already addressed. To engage in curious inquiry, one must be able to reflect on oneself as a subject—a thinking, learning, creative, and capable subject. The practices of framing and positioning require that one consciously observe oneself and critically analyze one's relationships and interrelationships with others. Similarly, reflection is necessary to initiate, maintain, and sustain dialogue across the new and often difficult terrain of intercultural praxis.

Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire (1998) noted in his book *Pedagogy of Freedom* that critical praxis “involves a dynamic and dialectic movement between ‘doing’ and ‘reflecting on doing’” (p. 43). Reflection is what informs our actions. Reflection that incorporates critical analyses of micro- and macro-levels of intercultural issues, which considers multiple cultural frames of reference, and that recognizes our own and others' positioning enables us to act in the world in meaningful, effective, and responsible ways.

Action

Influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1973/2000), the concept of intercultural praxis refers to an ongoing process of thinking, reflecting, and acting. Intercultural praxis is not only about deepening our understanding of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. Rather, intercultural praxis means we join our increased understanding with responsible action to make a difference in the world—to create a more socially just, equitable, and peaceful world.

Each one of us takes multiple and varied actions individually and collectively that have intercultural communication dimensions and implications every single day of our lives. We take action when we decide to get an education, to go to class or not, and when we select classes or a field of study. Our actions in an educational context are influenced by cultural, gendered, national, and class-based assumptions, biases, or constraints. We take action when we go to work and when we speak out or don't about inequity, discrimination, and misuses of power. Watching or reading the news is an action that affords opportunities to understand how cultural and national interests shape, limit, and bias the news we receive. Our consumption of products, food, and entertainment are all actions. When we know who has labored to make the goods we consume and under what conditions, we confront ourselves and others with the choices we make through our actions. We take action when we make decisions about whom we develop friendships and long-term relationships with and when we choose not to be involved. When we feel strongly enough about an issue, we are moved to organize and take action.

What informs our choices and actions? What are the implications of our actions? In the context of globalization, our choices and actions are always enabled, shaped, and constrained by history; relations of power; and material conditions that are inextricably linked to intercultural dimensions of culture, race, class, religion, sexual orientation, language, and nationality. Intercultural praxis, offers us a process of critical, reflective thinking and acting that enables us to navigate the complex and challenging intercultural spaces, we inhabit interpersonally, communally, and globally. Intercultural praxis can manifest in a range of forms, such as simple or complex communication competency skills, complicit actions, and oppositional tactics, as well as through creative, improvisational, and transformational interventions.

Summary

As we “open the conversation,” it is evident that there is a critical need for skillful and informed intercultural communicators in the current context of globalization. To assist us in making sense of intercultural communication in the rapidly changing, increasingly interdependent, and inequitable world we inhabit, I introduced various definitions of culture: (1) culture as shared meaning, (2) culture as contested meaning, and (3) culture as resource. Each definition provides different and necessary ways of understanding culture in our complex age. Studying intercultural communication in the context of globalization offers opportunities and challenges. To guide our approach and to increase our awareness, the basic concepts of positionality, standpoint theory, and ethnocentrism were introduced. Because we want to become more effective as intercultural communicators, thinkers, and actors in the global context, intercultural praxis—a set of skills, processes, and practices for critical, reflective thinking and acting—was outlined to navigate the complex, contradictory, and challenging intercultural spaces we inhabit. In the [next chapter](#), we explore the historical, political, and economic factors and forces that have contributed to globalization and discuss various dimensions of intercultural communication in the context of globalization.

Key Terms

high culture
low culture
popular culture
culture as shared meaning
symbols
culture as contested meaning
hegemony
culture as a resource
cultural identity
positionality
standpoint theory
ethnocentrism
intercultural praxis
social justice
inquiry
framing
positioning
dialogue
reflection
action

Discussion Questions and Activities

Discussion Questions

1. In the anthropologic definition, culture is defined as a site of shared meaning. How is this definition useful in understanding culture? In what ways does globalization complicate our understanding of culture as a site of shared meaning?
2. What is your positionality and how does it shape your standpoint? Why are these concepts important in studying intercultural communication?
3. How does hegemony—defined as domination through consent—function to produce and maintain relations of power in society? What are the examples of hegemonic forces that influence your life? Where do those hegemonic forces come from?
4. Do you think there are universal human values? If so, what are they? Is the belief in universal human values inherently ethnocentric?
5. The chapter defines Intercultural Praxis as a process of critical, reflective thinking and acting shaped by six ports of entry. In what ways is this approach different from learning a predetermined set of rules and norms for intercultural communication? Why does Intercultural Praxis emphasize the self-reflexive process of thinking and acting rather than following established rules of communication?

Activities

1. Exploring the Cultural Dimensions That Shape You

- a. Write a brief paragraph exploring the cultural dimensions that shape you using the definitions of culture discussed in this chapter. How do you understand your culture as a system of shared meanings? As a site of contestation? As a resource?

(For example, as an American, I value independence and individualism, which are cultural values that I share with many others from the United States. As a woman, I feel like I am constantly negotiating representations of what it means to be a woman. My gender culture is a site of contestation. Women, in this society, are often turned into objects like resources that can be exploited, packaged, and sold. Yet, I am proud to be a woman and experience this cultural dimension of myself as an empowering resource. As a White American, I know my experiences are different from other racial groups. I am learning how I am different from others and not just how they are different from me as a member of the dominant group. The privileges I have from being White are resources, even or especially when I can't see these invisible advantages.)

- b. Share your paragraph responses with your classmates, and discuss the similarities and differences among your cultural dimensions.
- c. Discuss the usefulness and limitations of each definition of culture.

2. Positioning Yourself and Your Cultural Dimensions

- a. Using your responses to the first activity, develop your ideas on how you are positioned in relation to others in terms of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, religion, and ableness.
- b. Discuss how your positionality influences your standpoint on the world around you and how you engage in intercultural communication.

3. Intercultural Praxis—Group Activity

In a group of four to five students, consider and discuss the following:

- a. Inquiry: What do you already know about each other? What stereotypes, preconceptions, and assumptions might you have about students in your class or those in your group? What would you like to know about the cultural background of those in your group? What skills and experience do you bring to the process of inquiry?
- b. Framing: In what ways does your cultural background frame the way you see and experience others in your group? What frames of reference are useful in understanding the members of your group? What can you see if you “zoom in” and look at the micro-level in terms of the cultural dimensions of your group? What can you see if you “zoom out” and look at the macro-level in terms of the cultural dimensions of your group?
- c. Positioning: How are you positioned sociohistorically in relation to others in your group? How does your positionality change in different contexts and frames of reference?
- d. Dialogue: With whom do you frequently engage in dialogue? How can you expand the circle of people with whom you engage in dialogue? What qualities are required to engage effectively in dialogue? How do relationships of power shape the process of dialogue?
- e. Reflection: As you reflect on your inquiry, framing, positioning, and dialogue, what have you learned about yourself, your group, and intercultural praxis?
- f. Action: How and when can you engage in intercultural praxis? How can you use what you have learned in this chapter to effect change for a more equitable and just world? What are the consequences and implications of lack of action?
- g. Finally, discuss the challenges of engaging in intercultural praxis. Keep your dialogue and reflections from this group activity in mind as you read the following chapters.