

# Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication

LaRay M. Barna



Why is it that contact with persons from other cultures is so often frustrating and fraught with misunderstanding? Good intentions, the use of what one considers to be a friendly approach, and even the possibility of mutual benefits don't seem to be sufficient to ensure success—to many people's surprise. A worse scenario is when rejection occurs just because the group to which a person belongs is "different." It's appropriate at this time of major changes in the international scene to take a hard look at some of the reasons for the disappointing results of attempts at communication. New proximity and new types of relationships are presenting communication challenges that few people are ready to meet.

## The Six Stumbling Blocks

### Assumption of Similarities

One answer to the question of why misunderstanding and/or rejection occurs is that many people naively assume there are sufficient similarities among peoples of the world to make communication easy. They expect that simply being human and having common requirements of food, shelter, security, and so on makes everyone alike. Unfortunately, they overlook the fact that

<sup>15</sup> In describing American social relations as "depersonalized" and those of others as "personalized," no invidious comparison is intended. Trust, goodwill, and acceptance of other people for what they are, for example, are American characteristics but they need not be personalized in their expression. Distrust and suspicion are quite personal and more common in many other parts of the world than in the United States.

<sup>16</sup> Rosalie H. Wax and Robert K. Thomas, "American Indians and White People," *Phylon* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1961): 305-17.

<sup>17</sup> Jules Henry, *Culture against Man* (New York: Random House, 1963).

<sup>18</sup> David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

<sup>19</sup> Arensburg and Niehoff, *Introducing Social Change*.

<sup>20</sup> Clyde Kluckhohn and Florence R. Kluckhohn, "American Culture: Generalized Orientations and Class Patterns," in *Conflicts of Power in Modern Culture: Seventh Symposium*, edited by Lyman Bryson (New York: Harper and Row, 1947).

<sup>21</sup> Foster, "Peasant Society."

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Mead, "The Factor of Culture," in *The Selection of Personnel for International Services*, edited by Mottram Torre (Geneva: Federation for Mental Health, 1963), 3-22.

<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People: A Study in National Character* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1948).

<sup>24</sup> Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (1966; reprint, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India-China-Tibet-Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> Janheinz Jahn, "Value Conceptions in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Cross-Cultural Understanding: Epistemology in Anthropology*, edited by Filmer Stuart C. Northrop and Helen H. Livingston (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 56.

<sup>27</sup> Filmer Stuart C. Northrop, *The Meeting of East and West, An Inquiry Concerning World Understanding* (New York: Macmillan, 1945).

<sup>28</sup> Foster, "Peasant Society."

<sup>29</sup> Foster, "Peasant Society"; Potter, *People of Plenty*.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, "Peasant Society," 296.

<sup>31</sup> The authors wish to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Jasper Ingersoll, Department of Anthropology, Catholic University, to the development of this table.

the forms of adaptation to these common biological and social needs and the values, beliefs, and attitudes surrounding them are vastly different from culture to culture. The biological commonalities are not much help when it comes to communication, where we need to exchange ideas and information, find ways to live and work together, or just make the kind of impression we want to make.

Another reason many people are lured into thinking that "people are people" is that it reduces the discomfort of dealing with difference, of not knowing. The thought that everyone is the same, deep down, is comforting. If someone acts or looks "strange" (different from them), it is then possible to evaluate this as wrong and treat everyone ethnocentrically.

The assumption of similarity does not often extend to the expectation of a common verbal language but it does interfere with caution in decoding nonverbal symbols, signs, and signals. No cross-cultural studies have proven the existence of a common nonverbal language except those in support of Darwin's theory that facial expressions are universal.<sup>1</sup> Paul Ekman found that "the particular visible pattern on the face, the combination of muscles contracted for anger, fear, surprise, sadness, disgust, happiness (and probably also for interest) is the same for all members of our species."<sup>2</sup>

This seems helpful until we realize that a person's cultural upbringing determines whether or not the emotion will be displayed or suppressed as well as on which occasions and to what degree.<sup>3</sup> The situations that bring about the emotional feeling also differ from culture to culture; for example, the death of a loved one may be a cause for joy, sorrow, or some other emotion, depending upon the accepted cultural belief.

Since there seem to be no universals of "human nature" that can be used as a basis for automatic understanding, we must treat each encounter as an individual case, searching for whatever perceptions and communication means are held in common and proceed from there. This is summarized by Vinh The Do:

If we realize that we are all culture bound and culturally modified, we will accept the fact that, being unlike, we do not really know what someone else "is." This is another way to view the "people are people" idea. We now have to find a way to sort out the cultural modifiers in each separate encounter to find similarity.<sup>4</sup>

Persons from the United States seem to hold this assumption of similarity more strongly than some other cultures do. The Japanese, for example, have the reverse belief that they are distinctly different from the rest of the world. This notion brings intercultural communication problems of its own. Expecting no similarities, they work hard to figure out the foreign stranger but do not expect foreigners to be able to understand them. This results in exclusionary attitudes and only passive efforts toward mutual understanding.<sup>5</sup>

As Western trappings permeate more and more of the world, the illusion of similarity increases. A look-alike facade deceives representatives from contrasting cultures when each wears Western dress, speaks English, and uses similar greeting rituals. It is like assuming that New York City, Tokyo, and Tehran are all alike because each has the appearance of a modern city. But without being alert to possible underlying differences and the need to learn new rules for functioning, persons going from one city to the other will be in immediate trouble, even when taking on such simple roles as pedestrian or driver. Also, unless a foreigner expects subtle differences, it will take a long time of noninsulated living in a new culture (not in an enclave of his or her own kind) before he or she can adjust to new perceptual and nonevaluative thinking.

The confidence that comes with the myth of similarity is much stronger than with the assumption of differences, the latter requiring tentative assumptions and behaviors and a willingness to accept the anxiety of not knowing. Only with the assumption of differences, however, can reactions and interpretations be adjusted to fit what is happening. Without it one is likely to misread signs and symbols and judge the scene ethnocentrically.

The stumbling block of assumed similarity is a "troublemaker," as one English learner expressed it, not only for the foreigner but for the people in the host country (United States or any other) with whom the international visitor comes into contact. The native inhabitants are likely to be lulled into the expectation that since the foreign person is dressed appropriately and speaks some of the native language, he or she will also have similar nonverbal codes, thoughts, and feelings. In the United States nodding, smiling, and affirmative comments will probably be confidently interpreted by straightforward, friendly Americans as meaning that they have informed, helped, and pleased the newcomer. It is likely, however, that the foreigner actually understood very little of the verbal and nonverbal content and was merely indicating

polite interest or trying not to embarrass himself or herself or the host by trying to verbalize questions. The conversation may even have confirmed a stereotype that Americans are insensitive and ethnocentric.

In instances like this, parties seldom compare impressions and correct misinterpretations. One place where opportunities for achieving insights do occur is in an intercultural classroom. Here, for example, U.S. students often complain that international student members of a discussion or project group seem uncooperative or uninterested. One person who had been thus judged offered the following explanation:

I was surrounded by Americans with whom I couldn't follow their tempo of discussion half of the time. I have difficulty to listen and speak, but also with the way they handle the group. I felt uncomfortable because sometimes they believe their opinion strongly. I had been very serious about the whole subject but I was afraid I would say something wrong. I had the idea but not the words.<sup>6</sup>

The classroom is also a good place to test whether one common nonverbal behavior, the smile, is actually the universal people assume it to be. The following enlightening comments came from international students newly arrived in the United States:<sup>7</sup>

*Japanese student: On my way to and from school I have received a smile by non-acquaintance American girls several times. I have finally learned they have no interest for me; it means only a kind of greeting to a foreigner. If someone smiles at a stranger in Japan, especially [at] a girl, she can assume he is either a sexual maniac or an impolite person.*

*Korean student: An American visited me in my country for one week. His inference was that people in Korea are not very friendly because they didn't smile or want to talk with foreign people. Most Korean people take time to get to be friendly with people. We never talk or smile at strangers.*

*Arab student: When I walked around the campus my first day, many people smiled at me. I was very embarrassed and rushed to the men's room to see if I had made a mistake with my clothes. But I could find nothing for them to smile at. Now I am used to all the smiles.*

*Vietnamese student: The reason why certain foreigners may think that Americans are superficial—and they are, some Americans even recognize this—is that they talk and smile too much. For people who come from placid cultures where nonverbal language is more used, and where a silence, a smile, a glance have their own meaning, it is true that Americans speak a lot. The superficiality of Americans can also be detected in their relations with others. Their friendships are, most of the time, so ephemeral compared to the friendships we have at home. Americans make friends very easily and leave their friends almost as quickly, while in my country it takes a long time to find out a possible friend and then she becomes your friend—with a very strong sense of the term.*

Statements from two U.S. students follow.<sup>8</sup> The first comes from someone who has learned to look for differing perceptions and the second, unfortunately, reflects the stumbling block of assumed similarity.

*U.S. student: I was waiting for my husband on a downtown corner when a man with a baby and two young children approached. Judging by small quirks of fashion [I guessed] he had not been in the U.S. long. I have a baby about the same age and in appreciation of his family and obvious involvement as a father I smiled at him. Immediately I realized I did the wrong thing as he stopped, looked me over from head to toe and said, "Are you waiting for me? You meet me later?" Apparently I had acted as a prostitute would in his country.*

*U.S. student: In general it seems to me that foreign people are not necessarily snobs but are very unfriendly. Some class members have told me that you shouldn't smile at others while passing them by on the street. To me I can't stop smiling. It's just natural to be smiling and friendly. I can see now why so many foreign people stick together. They are impossible to get to know. It's like the Americans are big bad wolves. How do Americans break this barrier? I want friends from all over the world but how do you start to be friends without offending them or scaring them off—like sheep?*

The discussion thus far threatens the popular expectation that increased contact with representatives of diverse cultures through travel, student exchange programs, joint business ventures, immigration, and so on will result in better understanding and friendship. Indeed, tests of that assumption have been disappointing.<sup>9</sup> For example, research has found that Vietnamese immigrants who speak English well and have the best jobs suffer more from psychosomatic complaints and psychological disorders and are less optimistic about the future than their counterparts who remain in ethnic enclaves without attempts to adjust to their new homeland. One explanation given by the researcher is that these persons, unlike the less acculturated immigrants, "spend considerable time in the mainstream of society, regularly facing the challenges and stresses of dealing with American attitudes."<sup>10</sup>

After twenty-four years of listening to conversations between international and U.S. students and professors and seeing the frustrations of both groups as they try to understand each other, I am inclined to agree with Charles Frankel, who says, "Tensions exist within nations and between nations that never would have existed were these nations not in such intensive cultural communication with one another."<sup>11</sup> Recent world events have proven this to be true.

From a communicative perspective, it doesn't have to be that way. Just as more opportunities now exist for cross-cultural contact, so does more information about how to meet this challenge. We now have access to more orientation and training programs around the world, more courses in intercultural communication in educational institutions, and more published material.<sup>12</sup> Until people can squarely face the likelihood of meeting up with difference and misunderstanding, however, they will not be motivated to take advantage of these resources.

Many potential travelers who do try to prepare for out-of-country travel (for business conferences, government negotiations, study tours, or whatever) might gather information about the customs of the other country and a smattering of the language. Behaviors and attitudes of its people are sometimes researched, but necessarily from a secondhand source, such as a friend who has "been there." Experts realize that information gained in this fashion is general, seldom sufficient, and may or may not be applicable to the specific situation a traveler encounters or an area that he or she visits. Also, knowing exactly "what to expect" often blinds the observer to all but that which confirms his or her image. Any contradictory evidence that does fil-

ter through the screens of preconception is likely to be treated as an exception and thus discounted.

A better approach is to begin by studying the history, political structure, art, literature, and language of the country as time permits. This provides a framework for on-site observations. It is even more important to develop an investigative, nonjudgmental attitude and a high tolerance for ambiguity—all of which require lowered defenses. Margaret Mead suggests sensitizing people to cross-cultural variables instead of developing behavior and attitude stereotypes. She reasons that there are individual differences in each encounter and that changes occur regularly in cultural patterns, making research information obsolete.<sup>13</sup>

Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett also warn against providing lists of "dos and don'ts" for travelers, mainly because behavior is ambiguous—the same action can have different meanings in different situations—and no one can be armed with prescriptions for every contingency. Instead they encourage people to learn to understand the assumptions and values on which their own behavior rests. This knowledge can then be compared with what is found in the other culture, and a "third culture" can be adopted based on expanded cross-cultural understanding.<sup>14</sup>

The remainder of this article will examine some of the variables of the intercultural communication process itself and point out danger zones therein.

### Language Differences

The first stumbling block has already been discussed at length—the hazard of assuming *similarity instead of difference*. A second danger will surprise no one—*language difference*. Vocabulary, syntax, idioms, slang, dialects, and so on all cause difficulty, but the person struggling with a different language is at least aware of being in trouble.

A greater language problem is the tenacity with which some people will cling to just one meaning of a word or phrase in the new language, regardless of connotation or context. The variations in possible meaning, especially when inflection and tone are varied, are so difficult to cope with that they are often waved aside. This complacency will stop a search for understanding. The nationwide misinterpretation of Khrushchev's sentence "We will bury you" is a classic example. Even "yes" and "no" cause trouble. When a nonnative speaker first hears the English phrase, "Won't you have some tea?" he or she listens to the literal meaning of the sentence and answers, "No," meaning that he or she

less obvious unspoken codes of the other cultures, such as the handling of time and spatial relationships and the subtle signs of respect of formality.

### **Preconceptions and Stereotypes**

The fourth stumbling block is the presence of *preconceptions and stereotypes*. If the label "inscrutable" has preceded the Japanese guests, their behaviors (including the constant and seemingly inappropriate smile) will probably be seen as such. The stereotype that Arabs are "inflammable" may cause U.S. students to keep their distance or even alert authorities when an animated and noisy group from the Middle East gathers. A professor who expects everyone from Indonesia, Mexico, and many other countries to "bargain" may unfairly interpret a hesitation or request from an international student as a move to manipulate preferential treatment.

Stereotypes help do what Ernest Becker says the anxiety-prone human race must do—reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world predictable.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, this is one of the basic functions of culture: to lay out a predictable world in which the individual is firmly oriented. Stereotypes are overgeneralized, secondhand beliefs that provide conceptual bases from which we make sense out of what goes on around us, whether or not they are accurate or fit the circumstances. In a foreign land their use increases our feeling of security. Stereotypes are psychologically necessary to the degree that we cannot tolerate ambiguity or the sense of helplessness resulting from our inability to understand and interact with people and situations beyond our comprehension.

Stereotypes are stumbling blocks for communicators because they interfere with objective viewing of stimuli—the sensitive search for cues to guide the imagination toward the other person's reality. They are not easy to overcome in ourselves or to correct in others, even with the presentation of evidence. Stereotypes persist because they are firmly established as myths or truisms by one's own national culture and because they sometimes rationalize prejudices. They are also sustained and fed by the tendency to perceive selectively only those pieces of new information that correspond to the image held. For example, a visitor who is accustomed to privation and the values of self-denial and self-help cannot fail to experience American culture as materialistic and wasteful. The stereotype for the visitor becomes a reality.

wants some. The U.S. hostess, on the other hand, ignores the double negative because of common usage, and the guest gets no tea. Also, in some cultures it is polite to refuse the first or second offer of refreshment. Many foreign guests have gone hungry because they never got a third offer. This is another case of where "no" means "yes."

There are other language problems, including the different styles of using language such as direct, indirect; expansive, succinct; argumentative, conciliatory; instrumental, harmonizing; and so on. These different styles can lead to wrong interpretations of intent and evaluations of insincerity, aggressiveness, deviousness, or arrogance, among others.

### **Nonverbal Misinterpretations**

Learning the language, which most visitors to foreign countries consider their only barrier to understanding, is actually only the beginning. As Frankel says, "To enter into a culture is to be able to hear, in Lionel Trilling's phrase, its special 'hum and buzz of implication'."<sup>15</sup> This suggests the third stumbling block, *nonverbal misinterpretations*. People from different cultures inhabit different sensory realities. They see, hear, feel, and smell only that which has some meaning or importance for them. They abstract whatever fits into their personal world of recognition and then interpret it through the frame of reference of their own culture. An example follows:

An Oregon girl in an intercultural communication class asked a young man from Saudi Arabia how he would nonverbally signal that he liked her. His response was to smooth back his hair, which to her was just a common nervous gesture signifying nothing. She repeated her question three times. He smoothed his hair three times. Then, realizing that she was not recognizing this movement as his reply to her question, he automatically ducked his head and stuck out his tongue slightly in embarrassment. This behavior was noticed by the girl and she expressed astonishment that he would show liking for someone by sticking out his tongue.

The misinterpretation of observable nonverbal signs and symbols—such as gestures, postures, and other body movements—a definite communication barrier. But it is possible to learn the meanings of these observable messages, usually in informal rather than formal ways. It is more difficult to understand the

### Tendency to Evaluate

The fifth stumbling block and deterrent to understanding between persons of differing cultures or ethnic groups is the *tendency to evaluate*, to approve or disapprove, the statements and actions of the other person or group. Rather than try to comprehend thoughts and feelings from the worldview of the other, we assume our own culture or way of life is the most natural. This bias prevents the open-mindedness needed to examine attitudes and behaviors from the other's point of view. A midday siesta changes from a "lazy habit" to a "pretty good idea" when someone listens long enough to realize the midday temperature in that country is 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

Fresh from a conference in Tokyo where Japanese professors had emphasized the preference of the people of Japan for simple natural settings of rocks, moss, and water and of muted greens and misty ethereal landscapes, I visited the Katsura Imperial Gardens in Kyoto. At the appointed time of the tour a young Japanese guide approached the group of twenty waiting Americans and remarked how fortunate it was that the day was cloudy. This brought hesitant smiles to the group, who were less than pleased at the prospect of a shower. The guide's next statement was that the timing of the summer visit was particularly appropriate in that the azalea and rhododendron blossoms were gone and the trees had not yet turned to their brilliant fall colors. The group laughed loudly, now convinced that the young man had a fine sense of humor. I winced at his bewildered expression, realizing that had I come before attending the conference, I would have shared the group's belief that he could not be serious.

The miscommunication caused by immediate evaluation is heightened when feelings and emotions are deeply involved; yet this is just the time when listening with understanding is most needed. As stated by Carolyn W. Sherif, Musafer Sherif, and Roger Nebergall, "A person's commitment to his religion, politics, values of his family, and his stand on the virtue of his way of life are ingredients in his self-picture—intimately felt and cherished."<sup>17</sup> It takes both an awareness of this tendency to close our minds and the courage to risk changing our own perceptions and values to dare to comprehend why someone thinks and acts differently from us. Religious wars and negotiation deadlocks everywhere are examples of this.

On an interpersonal level there are innumerable illustrations of the tendency to evaluate which result in a breach in intercultural relationships. Two follow:<sup>18</sup>

U.S. student: *A Persian friend got offended because when we got in an argument with a third party, I didn't take his side. He says back home you are supposed to take a friend's or family's side even when they are wrong. When you get home then you can attack the "wrongdoer" but you are never supposed to go against a relative or friend to a stranger. This I found strange because even if it is my mother and I think she is wrong, I say so.*

Korean student: *When I call on my American friend he said through window, "I am sorry. I have no time because of my study." Then he shut the window. I couldn't understand through my cultural background. House owner should have welcome visitor whether he likes or not and whether he is busy or not. Also the owner never speaks without opening his door.*

The admonition to resist the tendency to immediately evaluate does not mean that one should not develop one's own sense of right and wrong. The goal is to look and listen empathically rather than through the thick screen of value judgments that impede a fair and total understanding. Once comprehension is complete, it can be determined whether or not there is a clash in values or ideology. If so, some form of adjustment or conflict resolution can be put into place.

### High Anxiety

*High anxiety or tension*, also known as *stress*, is common in cross-cultural experiences due to the number of uncertainties present. The two words, *anxiety* and *tension*, are linked because one cannot be mentally anxious without also being physically tense. Moderate tension and positive attitudes prepare one to meet challenges with energy. Too much anxiety or tension requires some form of relief, which too often comes in the form of defenses, such as the skewing of perceptions, withdrawal, or hostility. That's why it is considered a serious stumbling block. As stated by Young Y. Kim,

Stress, indeed, is considered to be inherent in intercultural encounters, disturbing the internal equilibrium of the individual system. Accordingly, to be interculturally competent means to be able to manage such stress, regain internal balance, and carry out the communication process in such

a way that contributes to successful interaction outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

High anxiety or tension, unlike the other five stumbling blocks (assumption of similarity, language, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, and the practice of immediate evaluation), is not only distinct but often underlies and compounds the other stumbling blocks. The use of stereotypes and evaluations are defense mechanisms in themselves, used to alleviate the stress of the unknown. If the person were tense or anxious to begin with, these mechanisms would be used even more. Falling prey to the aura of similarity is also a protection from the stress of recognizing and accommodating to differences. Different language and nonverbal patterns are difficult to use or interpret under the best of conditions. The distraction of trying to reduce the feeling of anxiety (sometimes called "internal noise") makes mistakes even more likely. Jack R. Gibb remarks,

Defense arousal prevents the listener from concentrating upon the message. Not only do defensive communicators send off multiple value, motive, and affect cues, but also defensive recipients distort what they receive. As a person becomes more and more defensive, he becomes less and less able to perceive accurately the motives, the values, and the emotions of the sender.<sup>20</sup>

Anxious feelings usually permeate both parties in an intercultural dialogue. The host national is uncomfortable when talking with a foreigner because he or she cannot maintain the normal flow of verbal and nonverbal interaction. There are language and perception barriers; silences are too long or too short; proxemic and other norms may be violated. He or she is also threatened by the other's unknown knowledge, experience, and evaluation—the visitor's potential for scrutiny and rejection of the person and/or the country. The inevitable question, "How do you like it here?" which the foreigner abhors, is a quest for reassurance or at least a "feeler" that reduces the unknown. The reply is usually more polite than honest, but this is seldom realized.

The foreign members of dyads are even more threatened. They feel strange and vulnerable, helpless to cope with messages that swamp them. Their own normal reactions are inappropriate. Their self-esteem is often intolerably undermined unless they employ such defenses as withdrawal into their own reference group or into themselves, screen out or misperceive stimuli, use

rationalization or overcompensation, or become aggressive or hostile. None of these defenses leads to effective communication.

*Culture Shock.* If a person remains in a foreign culture over time, the stress of constantly being on guard to protect oneself against making "stupid mistakes" takes its toll and he or she will probably be affected by "culture fatigue," usually called *culture shock*. According to LaRay M. Barna, the innate physiological makeup of the human animal is such that discomfort of varying degrees occurs in the presence of alien stimuli. Without the normal props of one's own culture, there is unpredictability, helplessness, a threat to self-esteem, and a general feeling of "walking on ice"—all of which are stress producing.<sup>21</sup>

The result of several months of this sustained anxiety or tension (or excitation if the high activation is perceived positively) is that reserve energy supplies become depleted, the person's physical capacity is weakened, and a feeling of exhaustion, desperation, or depression may take over.<sup>22</sup> He or she consciously or unconsciously is then more likely to use psychological defenses, such as those described previously. If this temptation is resisted, the sojourner suffering from the strain of constant adjustment may find his or her body absorbing the stress in the form of stomach- or backaches, insomnia, inability to concentrate, or other stress-related illnesses.<sup>23</sup>

The following account by a sojourner to the United States illustrates the trauma of culture shock:

Soon after arriving in the United States from Peru, I cried almost every day. I was so tense I heard without hearing, and this made me feel foolish. I also escaped into sleeping more than twelve hours at a time and dreamed of my life, family, and friends in Lima. After three months of isolating myself in the house and speaking to no one, I vented out. I then began to have severe headaches. Finally I consulted a doctor, but she only gave me a lot of drugs to relieve the pain. Neither my doctor nor my teachers ever mentioned the two magic words that could have changed my life: culture shock! When I learned about this, I began to see things from a new point of view and was better able to accept myself and my feelings.

I now realize most of the Americans I met in Lima before I came to the U.S. were also in one of the stages of culture shock. They demonstrated a somewhat hostile attitude toward Peru, which the Peruvians sensed and usually moved from an initially friendly attitude to a defensive, aggressive attitude or to avoidance. The Americans mostly stayed within the safe cultural familiarity of the embassy compound. Many seemed to feel that the difficulties they were experiencing in Peru were specially created by Peruvians to create discomfort for "gringos." In other words, they displaced their problem of adjustment and blamed everything on Peru.<sup>24</sup>

Culture shock is a state of dis-ease, and, like a disease, it has different effects, different degrees of severity, and different time spans for different people. It is the least troublesome to those who learn to accept cultural diversity with interest instead of anxiety and manage normal stress reactions by practicing positive coping mechanisms, such as conscious physical relaxation.<sup>25</sup>

*Physiological Reactions.* Understanding the physiological component of the stumbling block of anxiety/tension helps in the search for ways to lessen its debilitating effects.<sup>26</sup> It is hard to circumvent because, as human animals, our biological system is set so that anything that is perceived as being "not normal" automatically signals an alert.<sup>27</sup> Depending on how serious the potential threat seems to be, extra adrenaline and noradrenaline pour into the system; muscles tighten; the heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate increase; the digestive process turns off; and other changes occur.<sup>28</sup>

This "fight or flight" response was useful—actually a biological gift for survival or effective functioning—when the need was for vigorous action. However, if the danger is to one's social self, which is more often the case in today's world, too much anxiety or tension just gets in the way. This is particularly true in an intercultural setting, where the need is for understanding, calm deliberation, and empathy in order to untangle misperceptions and enter into smooth relationships.

All is not doom and gloom, however. As stated by Holger Ursin, "The bodily response to changes in the environment and to threatening stimuli is simply activation."<sup>29</sup> Researchers believe that individuals control their emotional response to that activation by their own cognitions.<sup>30</sup> If a person expects something to

be exciting rather than frightening, he or she is more likely to interpret the somatic changes of the body as excitement. Hans Selye would label that "the good stress," which does much less harm unless it continues for some time without relief.<sup>31</sup> Feeling "challenged" facilitates functioning as opposed to feeling "threatened."<sup>32</sup>

People also differ in their stress tolerance. Everyone knows people who, for whatever the reasons, "fall apart at the least thing" and others who seem unflappable in any crisis. If you are one of the former, there are positive ways to handle the stress of intercultural situations, whether these be one-time encounters or frequent dialogues in multicultural settings. For starters, you can find opportunities to become familiar with many types of people so that differences become normal and interesting instead of threatening. And you can practice body awareness so that changes that signify a stress reaction can be identified and counteracted.

## Conclusion

Being aware of the six stumbling blocks is certainly the first step in avoiding them, but it isn't easy. For most people it takes insight, training, and sometimes an alteration of long-standing habits or thinking patterns before progress can be made. The increasing need for global understanding, however, gives all of us the responsibility for giving it our best effort.

We can study other languages and learn to expect differences in nonverbal forms and other cultural aspects. We can train ourselves to meet intercultural encounters with more attention to situational details. We can use an investigative approach rather than stereotypes and preconceptions. We can gradually expose ourselves to differences so that they become less threatening. We can even learn to lower our tension level when needed to avoid triggering defensive reactions.

The overall goal should be to achieve *intercultural communication competence*, which is defined by Kim as "the overall interpersonal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, cultural differences and unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the accompanying experience of stress."<sup>33</sup>

Roger Harrison adds a final thought:

The communicator cannot stop at knowing that the people he is working with have different customs, goals, and thought patterns from his own.



He must be able to feel his way into intimate contact with these alien values, attitudes, and feelings. He must be able to work with them and within them, neither losing his own values in the confrontation nor protecting himself behind a wall of intellectual detachment.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: Appleton, 1872); Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *Ethology: The Biology of Behavior* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970); Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "Constants across Cultures in the Face and Emotion," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 17 (1971): 124-29.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ekman, "Movements with Precise Meanings," *Journal of Communication* 26 (Summer 1976): 19-20.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "The Repertoire of Nonverbal Behavior—Categories, Origins, Usage, and Coding," *Semiotica* 1 (1969): 1.

<sup>21</sup> Personal correspondence. Mr. Do is a multicultural specialist, Portland Public Schools, Portland, Oregon.

<sup>22</sup> E. Tai, "Modification of the Western Approach to Intercultural Communication for the Japanese Context," master's thesis, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, 1986: 45-47.

<sup>23</sup> Taken from student papers in a course in intercultural communication taught by the author.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Bryant Wedge, *Visitors to the United States and How They See Us* (Princeton, NJ: D. Van Nostrand, 1965); and Milton Miller et al., "The Cross-Cultural Student: Lessons in Human Nature," *Bulletin of Menninger Clinic* (March 1971).

<sup>27</sup> Jack D. Horn, "Vietnamese Immigrants: Doing Poorly by Doing Well," *Psychology Today* (June 1980): 103-04.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Frankel, *The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1965): 1.

<sup>29</sup> For information see newsletters and other material prepared by the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR), 1444 I Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC, 20005. Sources are also listed in the *International and Intercultural Communication Annual*, published by the National Communication Association, 5105 Backlick Rd., Suite E, Annandale, VA, 22003; the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Department of Psychology, University of Mississippi, University, MS, 38677.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Mead, "The Cultural Perspective," in *Communication or Conflict*, edited by Mary Capes (New York: Association Press, 1960).

<sup>31</sup> Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1991).

<sup>32</sup> Frankel, *Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs*, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Ernest Becker, *The Birth and Death of Meaning* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 84-89.

<sup>34</sup> Carolyn W. Sherif, Musafer Sherif, and Roger Nebergall, *Attitude and Attitude Change* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1965), vi.

<sup>18</sup> Taken from student papers in a course in intercultural communication taught by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Young Y. Kim, "Intercultural Communication Competence: A Systems-Theoretic View," in *Cross-Cultural Interpersonal Communication*, vol. 15, edited by Stella Ting-Toomey and Felipe Korzeny, *International and Intercultural Communication Annual* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Jack R. Gibb "Defensive Communication," *Journal of Communication* 2 (September 1961): 141-48.

<sup>21</sup> LaRay M. Barna, "The Stress Factor in Intercultural Relations," in *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, vol. 2, edited by Dan Landis and Richard W. Brislin (New York: Pergamon Press, 1983), 42-43.

<sup>22</sup> Hans Selye, "Stress: It's a G.A.S.," *Psychology Today* (September 1969).

<sup>23</sup> Barna, "Stress Factor," 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> Personal correspondence.

<sup>25</sup> Barna, "Stress Factor," 33-39.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Selye, *Stress without Distress* (New York, J. B. Lippincott, 1974); Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 334-42; Holger Ursin, "Activation, Coping and Psychosomatics," in *Psychobiology of Stress: A Study of Coping Men*, edited by Eirind Baade, Seymour Levine, and Holger Ursin (New York: Academic Press, 1978).

<sup>28</sup> Donald Oken, "Stress—Our Friend, Our Foe," in *Blue Print for Health* (Chicago: Blue Cross, 1974).

<sup>29</sup> Ursin, "Activation, Coping and Psychosomatics," 219.

<sup>30</sup> B. B. Brown, "Perspectives on Social Stress," in *Selye's Guide to Stress Research*, vol. 1, edited by Hans Selye (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980); J. P. Keating, "Environmental Stressors: Misplaced Emphasis Crowding as

Stressor," in *Stress and Anxiety*, vol. 6, edited by Irwin G. Sarason and Charles D. Spielberger (Washington, DC: Hemisphere, 1979); Stanley Schachter and J. E. Singer, "Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional

State," *Psychological Review* 69 (1962).

<sup>31</sup> Hans Selye, "On the Real Benefits of Eustress," *Psychology Today* (March 1978).

<sup>32</sup> Richard S. Lazarus, "Positive Denial: The Case for Not Facing Reality," *Psychology Today* (November 1979).

<sup>33</sup> Kim, "Intercultural Communication Competence," 259.

<sup>34</sup> Roger Harrison, "The Design of Cross-Cultural Training: An Alternative to the University Model," in *Explorations in Human Relations Training and Research*, NEA, no. 2 (Bethesda, MD: National Training Laboratories, 1966), 4.