



Introducing
**INTERCULTURAL
COMMUNICATION**
Global Cultures and Contexts

Shuang Liu, Zala Volčič & Cindy Gallois



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne

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The extent to which host nationals allow members of migrant groups to maintain their own culture and partake in relationships with the dominant cultural group plays an important role in the construction of a truly multicultural society. Promoting intercultural understanding facilitates cultural adjustment by both migrants and host nationals, and intercultural communication is central to promoting inter-ethnic understanding. Interacting with migrants is often difficult for host nationals, because of differences in language and cultural values, and this adds anxiety to intercultural interactions. To reduce anxiety of this nature, we must equip ourselves with knowledge about other cultures, and with knowledge about how cultures differ and ways of navigating these differences. Intercultural knowledge reduces anxiety and uncertainty, making the communication process smoother and more successful. Intercultural communication knowledge and skills do not come naturally; they must be acquired through conscious learning. In this book, our goal is to equip you with this knowledge and these skills.

SUMMARY

- Transmission of cultures across geographic borders occurred long before the study of intercultural communication was formalized as a field.
- Advances in communication technologies, the global economy, business and international migration are major contributors to cultural diversity in our societies.
- Virtual intercultural communication is an integral part of life in the global community, creating opportunities to connect anywhere and anytime, but creating challenges as well.
- While the geographic borders that used to separate people from people and country from country are receding, issues arising from cultural diversity and multiculturalism, such as protecting the uniqueness of the mainstream culture, remain.
- Intercultural communication equips us with the necessary knowledge and skills to interact with culturally different people effectively and appropriately.

CASE STUDY

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION DURING A PANDEMIC

From the first news of a novel coronavirus in December 2019, defined as coronavirus disease 2019 (SARS-CoV2 or COVID-19) by the World Health Organization in February 2020, the pandemic was at the top of the agenda of media reports and government policies of all countries, exerting a significant impact on human communication both across and within cultural boundaries. During the pandemic, constantly communicating vital health information has been crucial. However, the COVID-19 pandemic also elicited conspiracy theories, fake news

and misinformation. Social networks of family and friends have accelerated transmission of harmful as well as helpful information about the pandemic. Given the proliferation of information sources during outbreaks, knowledge about source credibility perceived by different cultural groups is crucial for government and health officials to effectively reach and support them, because sources perceived as credible and trustworthy are more persuasive. Ensuring anticipated behavioural responses to government messages and measures during outbreaks is vital to protect the health and well-being of the public.

Effective use of a local community leader as a credible voice to relate government messages to the cultural group can enhance the cultural appropriateness of the messages and support community adoption. In some cultures, government messages communicated by religious leaders may be more effective. During the Western African Ebola crisis, for example, religious leaders across faiths in Sierra Leone proved effective in advocating for practices such as hand washing and safe burials (Greyling et al., 2016). Research shows that trust in health officials also contributed to adopting preventative measures such as Ebola vaccinations in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Vinck et al., 2019). While measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, such as isolation and social distancing, are similar worldwide, people from different cultural backgrounds may interpret and respond to such measures very differently because behavioural responses are shaped by cultural context. A lack of culture-based understanding of behavioural drivers among different cultural groups during outbreaks can undermine the effectiveness of government messages and measures in achieving the anticipated outcomes, which in turn can incur health, economic and social costs to individuals, communities and society.

Individual behaviours are rooted in beliefs and values and the behaviours people believe others expect of them (Bavel et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic requires government and health officials to persuade the public to make various changes, sometimes drastic, in their routines and behaviours, to contain the pandemic. However, the extent to which people adhere closely to rules or look for opportunities to violate rules can vary across cultural groups. Tighter cultures are more likely to accept behavioural constraints, whereas looser cultures accustomed to prioritizing freedom may have more difficulty coordinating collective actions in the face of a pandemic (Wolf et al., 2020). Research shows that tight cultures such as Singapore, Japan and China tend to have strong social norms and punishments for deviance, while loose cultures such as the USA, Italy and Brazil have weaker social constraints and are more permissive (Bavel et al., 2020). Western European and North American cultures consider individuals as independent, whereas Asian cultures view them as interdependent. Consequently, we see that health priorities

are more easily given to the collective in Asian societies, in which individuals are willing to sacrifice personal interest for the sake of the group. In contrast, social norms in North America and much of Western Europe tend to value individual freedom of expression and make compliance trickier; people may need to see benefit to themselves to comply with new rules. However, the difference between more collectivistic and more **individualistic** cultures in adherence to public health measures may be an oversimplification. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, compliance with border closures and other barrier measures in the COVID-19 pandemic has been very high, even though these are highly individualistic cultures where individual freedom and autonomy are highly valued. It may be that the health beliefs in these societies interact with other aspects of the culture to produce more trust in public health messages. Understanding the cultural processes underpinning health behaviours can inform the design of culturally appropriate communication strategies to bring about expected behavioural changes among different cultural groups.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 and the need to wait for effective treatments or vaccines underscored the importance of effective health communication strategies to enable changes in human behaviour to contain the pandemic. Media reports tended to sensationalise all aspects of the pandemic, and thus to add to a climate of fear and hostility. As many scholars have noted, it is in stressful times like these that social and cultural identities can become much more influential. Furthermore, media stories have questioned the place, policies and people assumed to be responsible for the spread of the virus, and these perceptions of the pandemic have greatly challenged intercultural relations, giving rise to racism and discrimination. Closure of national borders has only intensified divisions between countries and cultural groups. Intercultural communication can be a cure for the division, created by fear and hostility between cultural groups and nations, that has been exacerbated by COVID-19. As we adhere to health measures such as social distancing in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus, it is more important than ever to understand both the inner workings of specific cultures and the interactions between cultures. This pandemic is a historical moment that will have a lasting effect on the ways in which people and different communities relate to one another.