AMONG CULTURES

THE CHALLENGE OF COMMUNICATION

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FOURTH EDITION

Among Cultures

Through its unique approach of using narratives and stories to convey theories and concepts, this text, now in its fourth edition, gives students a foundational knowledge in intercultural communication that is imperative for understanding and navigating our increasingly complex human interactions.

This edition continues with an interpretive approach to intercultural communication that is dedicated to providing resources to understand and explain how our own and other cultural systems are reasonable and valuable. New to this edition are increased explorations of immigration, intersectionality, and privilege. For greater flexibility, it introduces a series of mini chapters on topics such as globalization (including discussion of the impact of new media and popular culture), education, and the role of culture in family communication, health communication, environmental communication and multicultural leadership. Each chapter again closes with a summary, reflection questions, and suggestions for activities available for students' own review or as potential class exercises.

The book is an ideal companion for introductory or upper-level undergraduate courses in intercultural communication.

Online resources include self-tests, enrichment activities, reflection questions, recommendations for additional readings for students, lecture slides, chapter objectives, supplemental readings, sample discussion and test questions, and additional classroom activities for instructors. Please visit www.routledge.com/cw/hall.

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Among Cultures

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Fourth Edition

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 7   Why Do So Many People Get Treated Poorly?   157

CHAPTER 8   How Can We Manage Conflict in Intercultural Settings?   185

CHAPTER 9   How Can We Succeed in Our Intercultural Transitions?   216

CHAPTER 10   Can Judgments of Right and Wrong Be Made When Dealing with Other Cultures?   243

PREFACE

As I approached the writing of this fourth edition, it was with a touch of sadness, a touch of excitement, and a touch of hope. The sadness came as I reflected on what appears to be the growing divisions in the world, locally and globally. Some of this may be due to the power of new media, as discussed in our final chapter, which makes these divisions explicit. Even so, as I work on a text for the fourth time that is focused on ways to peacefully and productively celebrate our many differences, it is a bit saddening to feel that division and discord are growing. At the same time, it is exciting to work on a project like this and to be thinking about new ways to communicate the principles we are committed to share with you, the reader.

This book is written during the time of COVID-19 and its many variants. There is also a lot going on related to a lack of social justice for many groups and individuals. These large-scale problems may well feel overwhelming and you may wonder what difference you can make. But what you do matters, though it may not make the news and you may not feel like it is. Even if it seems cliché; it does make a difference. Our social world is built on countless small interactions and choices. I hope we will all make as many of these interactions and choices ones that build others up and allow us to connect with others, including those very culturally different than ourselves. I hope this book can help us slow our tendency to judge quickly and harshly; after all, we are all cultural strangers to someone else. I have been accused before of being overly optimistic, but even with the tendency for people to slip into their own social media vacuum and to fear and/or distrust anything that is different, I believe we as people have a great aptitude for good. Without closing my eyes to the suffering and many challenges that exist in the world, I still find many examples of goodness, of kindness, and of concern for others. I have a lot of hope for our wonderfully diverse and multicultural world.

INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION: AN EXERCISE IN SERENDIPITY

Intercultural experiences for me have always been marked by serendipity. Serendipities are unexpected finds or discoveries that eventually turn out to be both pleasant and stimulating. To me the field of intercultural communication has always been ripe with serendipities. The study of intercultural communication inherently involves exposure to different ways through which meaning is produced among and across communities. What better seed could there be to grow serendipities? When I was still very young, I was essentially planted in a field which forced interaction with many Native Americans. Some of my early experiences with this group of people were surprising, but as I sorted through them and continued the interactions, I developed not only a taste, but a love for these new perspectives. Later when I lived in Europe for a couple of years, I continued to have these surprising but stimulating experiences and was even introduced to the term serendipity, which I now use to describe them.

I suspect that for many of us it was just such serendipitous occurrences that helped our interest in culture and intercultural interactions to grow. Discovering the unexpected and then, despite any initial frustration, finding the new understanding acquired through that discovery to be sweet and stimulating can be a great motivator for cultivating those opportunities in the future.

It is my desire that each of you in your own lives and in working with this text will also harvest serendipity. For, although by its very definition we cannot control or predict its exact occurrence, we can encourage it by our involvement in and attention to a culturally diverse world. I encourage you to share with others, as I have tried to do in this book, the serendipities that occur in your own lives.

Bradford 'J' Hall

As an immigrant to the United States from Mexico, for me, cultural and intercultural communication have meant much more than learning about and enacting abstract concepts and practices. Since the age of eight, my everyday life has involved confronting multiple and divergent worlds. Along the way, these worlds have clashed on occasion because the ways that some people in the United States do life was/is very different from the one I left in my original homeland. Moreover, I have had the privilege of living in and visiting several states in this country, traveling to various places around the world (Turkey, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, and Germany), and spending 18 months living and working in France. So my personal experience has meant that daily, whether in the United States or abroad, I have had to negotiate the reality that other peoples' lives are informed by worldviews, values, attitudes, emotions, and rules for communicating that are similar to as well as radically different from the ones with which I was raised. To give you an example, although I have lived in the United Sates for several decades, to this day I struggle with treating elders in the same manner as young persons. If an elder enters a room and I am sitting down I immediately stand up, and I use honorifics to address the elder rather than using a first name as is acceptable by many people here. The respectful treatment of elders is a value that was taught to me from an early age and continues to serve as a deeply felt Mexican cultural practice that I tried to pass on to my son. I am not necessarily saying that one culture is better than another; but rather that each culture offers a different possibility.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS POSSIBILITY

What I appreciate most about the study of cultural and intercultural communication is the fact that it offers myriad valuable, accessible, and useful possibilities for understanding one another, for developing friendships, and for enjoying peace through our cultural differences.

You and we know that cultural differences can be used as possibility for distinguishing ourselves from others in affirming and disconfirming ways. Especially in moments of conflict, differences can bring us to assert, "I am not like you!" In extreme situations, we might use our differences to set up divisions, disenfranchisements, and oppressions at all levels of our existence. However, we also know that being aware of and understanding others' cultural differences also can serve as powerful means for achieving affirmative social ends. In moments of friendship and rapprochement we might be prompted to say, "We have more in common that I thought." One of the advantageous aspects about difference is that it can mean introducing into our lives alternative ways of speaking and not speaking, eating, dressing, managing conflict, using time, engaging nature, and making human connections, among other possibilities. Again to give you an example; prior to my research into communicative silence, I thought that the absence of talk meant something was wrong among

interactants—that communication was empty and should be filled with words the sooner the better. Studying communicative silence has taught me a new way for appreciating it and for integrating it into my own life. Now I realize that silence can help us communicate in ways other than through words. I've learned that silence can help shape identities, and can help us construct communal connectedness and continuity. And I've learned that silence can help people protect their cherished cultures. In my college classrooms, my students often are astonished, although they are not always pleased, by how long I can stand in silence waiting for them to think through and respond to questions during group discussions. And I have learned to sit still and listen to the sounds nature uses to communicate. This is not a skill I developed in childhood, where the clamor of Mexico City traffic was more familiar. Without question my own life and my intercultural agility have been richly enhanced through the possibility of hearing silence differently.

It is beyond evident that our contemporary world is giving way to much painful possibility. Our planet is hosting bloody wars on every continent, routinely tolerating mass attacks on innocent civilians, generating thousands of homeless refugees, and producing countless disenfranchised people at all levels of society. Still, intercultural communication bears the promise of alternative outcomes. We have unprecedented opportunities for using our knowledge, skills, and will to shape a better world; we can do this one intercultural conversation at a time. Through the concepts, explanations, questions, suggested activities, resources, and especially the personal narratives presented in this book, we offer useful tools to help you achieve more productive intercultural relationships. It is our way of offering you a new possibility. Moreover, in our increasingly mobile and conflicted world, education must include dialogues that enhance harmonious intercultural interaction and the possibility for peaceful living.

Patricia O. Covarrubias

Similar to Brad and Patricia, I have had the good fortune to travel and live in other countries. These opportunities helped me recognize the wealth of diverse cultures that make each of us who we are. When I was first introduced to the study of Intercultural Communication in college I was amazed! It seemed like the observations I had made throughout my life were shared and explained by others. I felt like I had discovered a new section in the library with new information to explore. I was and still am excited to travel the journey of Intercultural Communication. I hope you can also experience this type of enthusiasm in your journeys.

I have come to realize that there are multicultural influences that are regionally as well as internationally and nationally situated. I grew up in Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s. As a young person I moved with my family to the Midwest. That move produced a huge culture shock for me. Rather than sunshine and beaches, I was confronted by cold and damp weather. I was also surrounded by people with ideas and behaviors that were much more conservative than those I had experienced as a child.

I returned to Southern California in my teens and realized that even within that region there were cultural differences. In my teens and 20s I lived in a different neighborhood than where I grew up and again learned the cultural nuances of my new environment. The experiences in my early life prompted my curiosity about differences. Those eye-opening opportunities in my early life encouraged me to keep an open mind and travel the path of adventure, rather than judgment. That sense of exploration has been foundational in my studies of Intercultural Communication.

As an adult I lived for ten years in three very different geographical and cultural locations. I lived and worked for three years in Abu Dhabi, one of the United Arab Emirates, three more years in Manhattan, in New York City, and another three years in the state of Quintana Roo in Mexico. I also left the Western United States to live and teach in Eastern North Carolina

for eight years. In all of these locations, I learned about languages, appropriate behavior, and other features of intercultural communication that are covered in our textbook.

What I discovered is that in every "place" there are learning opportunities. The people, the customs, the food, and components of life that I encounter keep me learning and growing as a human being. For me, learning and growing create "the joy of living." My life is more full and rich because of the diversity I have been so fortunate to experience. Today I am more curious than ever about different ways of thinking, acting, and communicating that I get to encounter on a daily basis. It is ingrained in me to say and think "how interesting" when I meet someone with different customs and different ways of approaching the world. I love the feeling of adventure I experience as I take new journeys of exploration in the world of intercultural communication on a regular basis.

My hope for you as a student and reader of this textbook is that you will experience the sense of curiosity I have. I hope that you too will come to enjoy learning about new cultures, new patterns of communication, and new ways of engaging with the world and people around you. Welcome to the new section of the library!

Kristin A. Kirschbaum

WHAT HAS CHANGED AND WHAT HAS NOT IN THIS EDITION

There are many changes in this edition. Perhaps the most apparent change is that we have eliminated the old Chapters 10 and 11 and replaced them with seven mini chapters. Based on the reviews of the textbook and our own review of how we used the book in our classes, we decided to try something quite different. We now have ten chapters we view as basic for any intercultural communication course. The five anonymous reviewers also consistently indicated that these chapters were important in their own classes. However, there was a range of other topics that, for the three of us, the five reviewers and others we visited with informally, were also seen as important. We knew from a practical standpoint that we could not cover all of these topics with full-length chapters, and though some topics were easily incorporated into chapters that already existed, other topics did not lend themselves to this approach. Nor did our efforts to combine these various topics have the flow or focus we desired. This led us to the idea of mini chapters.

Mini chapters allow instructors to use the book more intentionally to fit their own areas of concern. The topics we cover with mini chapters include: Family Dynamics, Leadership, Education, Healthcare, Environment and Ecotourism, Theoretical Perspectives, and Globalization. A mini chapter is roughly a third of the size of a normal chapter and could easily be combined with other mini chapters or combined with one of the full-length chapters. For example, a person may decide to link the mini chapter on families with the chapter on identities, or connect globalization with the chapter on intercultural transitions. Below is a list outlining two of what we see as excellent combinations for each of the mini chapters, though we want to stress that there is no "right or wrong" combination. It is what works best for you in your teaching.

Mini Chapter	Combination with Two Full-Length Chapters
Chapter 11 (Theoretical Perspectives)	Chapter 1: Introduction to Culture Chapter 3: Ways to Learn about Culture
Chapter 12 (Families & Culture)	Chapter 4: Identities Chapter 8: Conflict
Chapter 13 (Culture & Healthcare)	Chapter 5: Verbal Communication Chapter 7: Prejudice

Chapter 14 (Leadership in Multicultural Settings)	Chapter 8: Conflict Chapter 10: Ethics
Chapter 15 (Culture & the Environment/Ecotourism)	Chapter 6: Nonverbal Communication Chapter 9: Transitions
Chapter 16 (Education & Culture)	Chapter 2: Worldviews, Values, & Norms Chapter 3: Ways to Learn about Culture
Chapter 17 (Globalization, New Media, & Popular Culture)	Chapter 4: Identities Chapter 10: Ethics

Of course, multiple mini chapters could be combined with each other to show the way different applied contexts are impacted by culture. For example, the leadership chapter (14) could be combined with healthcare (13) to provide a specific context, or someone may want to consider the different theoretical perspectives (11) with a specific topic like globalization (17). Another possibility that Brad is using is to divide his class into groups that align with the number of different mini chapters and have each group do a presentation to the class on that particular topic near the end of the semester. In short, the idea behind the mini chapters is to help give instructors greater flexibility in course design and focus. Please feel free to experiment, and we would love to hear about your ideas and how they have worked for you.

It should also be noted that some other very important topic areas brought up in the reviews were addressed by adding them into appropriate areas within some of the larger chapters. So, for example, Chapter 9 has been changed from intercultural travels to intercultural transitions and the topic of immigration is covered as one of the important sections. In Chapter 4, which focuses on identity, we added more on the concept of face, and we added sections dealing with intersectionality and privilege. These concepts lent themselves to being incorporated into the core ten chapters that are full-length.

In addition, many of the examples were updated to include more recent events, such as dealing with issues related to Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the topic of Chapter 5, verbal communication, stayed the same, the chapter was completely reorganized in a way that we hope will make the information more accessible. In short, there have been a lot of changes made to the fourth edition.

However, one thing that has not changed is the overall narrative perspective the book adopts. This text is grounded in the idea that people make sense of their world through a process of choosing and telling narratives to themselves and others. One of the basic communicative forms through which we as humans understand our own and others' lives is narrative. By narratives we refer to any discourse which expresses actions that occur over time and are related to some point of concern. Thus, even when we are telling others about what seem like ordinary experiences in our lives, we are telling stories or narratives. We as humans are at heart storytellers. Indeed, consciously or unconsciously, we are often engaged in choosing among competing narratives. The very quality of our lives is thus inseparable from the quality of our stories.

In keeping with this belief, this text is unusually full of narratives or stories. Each chapter begins with a narrative, and a variety of narratives are interwoven throughout the text. Instead of simply giving examples, like African Americans are polychronic, we try as much as possible to share a story that illustrates this and other related concepts. We believe this is a more effective way to learn about these concepts because the stories provide not only illustrative examples, but a context upon which discussion and analysis may be based. We hope that the many narratives we include in the text encourage you to remember and be more aware of related stories in your own lives. We always love to listen to and learn from good stories, so please feel free to contact us and share any of your own stories.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The text has a variety of features that make it accessible to students. As noted above, one of the main features of the text is that it is full of narratives that can be used both as illustrations of concepts and discussion starters. The text includes various activities that the students can do as part of reading the text, such as the self-assessments in terms of the students' worldviews and nonverbal self-knowledge tests. The text also includes other activity ideas at the end of each chapter that are meant to provide ideas that the student or instructor may use to expand the learning process. Each student and each class may only use a few of these activities, but there are a variety of activities from which to choose. Some of them may need to be modified to better fit the individual needs of the students. The text also includes reflection questions both within the chapters and at the end of each chapter. Aside from personal reflection, these questions may be used as part of a class discussion, or students may be asked to respond in writing to one specific reflection question from each chapter.

Each of the chapter headings is phrased in a question format because learning is stimulated and aided through the asking of questions. Learning to ask quality questions is an important part of any educational process. The chapter questions come from a combination of what we feel are important questions to ask in order to get a solid introduction into the field of intercultural communication, and from areas with which our students have shown a particular concern over the years. For example, we have found students to be particularly interested in the ethical issues addressed in Chapter 10.

In order to give a summary of the overall text, we now briefly review each of the chapter questions and provide a brief idea of the way we go about answering them.

Chapter 1: What is meant by intercultural communication? There are hundreds of definitions of culture and communication in scholarly literature and just about as many struggles over which definitions are best. This is because the ability to define what is or is not covered in a concept is very powerful. Definitional work is also a very important step in our efforts to organize our knowledge in a useful and memorable way. It is very difficult to deal meaningfully with a concept if we do not at least have a rough understanding of what is meant by it. This chapter does not directly concern itself with which definitions are best. It does, however, lay an important foundation for understanding the concepts and issues that will be considered throughout the rest of the text.

Chapter 2: What is the relationship between communication and culture? Given a basic understanding of terms such as communication, culture, and intercultural, one of the next logical steps is understanding how and to what extent they connect to each other. This question also allows us to further explore some of the basic concepts in the field, such as worldviews, norms, and values, which may be considered in any specific context.

Chapter 3: How can we learn about our own and others' cultures? Many introductory texts do not deal with this issue, or do so very briefly. However, we feel strongly that how we learn about a topic influences what we can learn. We hope that our students will want to learn about others outside of the classroom setting and continue learning after the course is over. With this in mind we introduce communicative forms, such as narratives, rituals, and social dramas that can help us learn about others without having an advanced degree. An added benefit of this chapter is that it allows the students to understand how they have been learning culture all of their lives.

Chapter 4: How is culture related to our identities? If we cannot connect the idea of culture to ourselves, we believe it will have little lasting value in our lives. We first review what is encompassed by the term identity, including discussions of different levels of identity in our lives and the role of power in identity negotiation. We consider the role of communication in the formation of identities and pathways that lead to our various identities. We explore ideas tied to face, intersectionality, and privilege.

Chapter 5: Where can we look to explain verbal misunderstandings? The frustrations that arise from misunderstandings, even when we think we have been very clear, are at the heart of many people's desire to study intercultural communication. This chapter focuses on the issues related to verbal misunderstandings. We use the mnemonic TALK to examine issues related to different Types of talk, the Affiliations we create in our talk and how they impact it, the role of Language in general in intercultural settings, and some Key contextual factors that shape the way we interpret the verbal communication of others.

Chapter 6: Where can we look to explain nonverbal misunderstandings? In this chapter we focus on nonverbal communication misunderstandings. We examine not only the relationship of nonverbal and verbal communication, but the functions of nonverbal communication in different communities. This chapter reviews research on a wide variety of different forms of nonverbal communication, including kinesics, paralanguage, proxemics and specific items, such as food, clothes, and smell.

Chapter 7: Why do so many people get treated poorly? It doesn't take an overly careful observer to realize that in many intercultural settings people are often treated very poorly. Some communities or types of people seem to be targeted for frequent mistreatment. This chapter tries to go beyond the usual discussions of ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice to better understand why these things exist even when people agree that they are bad. We discuss the distinctions between these three different areas in terms of their forms and functions in society. We spend more time than is usual with issues of prejudice in terms of how people justify and accept prejudice into their lives. The text deals with these areas in a way which avoids the usual defensive responses that these discussions can provoke and tries to help readers make personal discoveries and decisions about their own personal experiences with prejudice, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism.

Chapter 8: How can we manage conflict in intercultural settings? Conflict will happen in intercultural interactions. Given that assumption, in this chapter we explore what distinguishes intercultural conflict from other forms of conflict and discuss different types of intercultural conflict. We also examine issues of fear, competition, power, and history in relation to intergroup conflicts that are so often connected to intercultural settings. Finally, we discuss and illustrate a variety of resources that people may adopt to manage intercultural conflicts in positive or mutually satisfactory ways. We conclude by considering a concept that is important to dealing positively with any form of conflict; forgiveness.

Chapter 9: How can we succeed in our intercultural transitions? Many, if not most, people will have the experience of traveling to different cultural communities at some point in their lives. This experience can be a critical incident in intercultural relations, affecting generations of people. This chapter reviews three of the major models of acculturation and how they may be used to improve our intercultural travels. We discuss the often-difficult process of returning home from our intercultural travels. We end this chapter by exploring ideas tied to immigration, as these more permanent intercultural transitions have become an increasing point of conflict across the globe.

Chapter 10: Can judgments of right and wrong be made when dealing with other cultures? This chapter deals with the issues of ethics and building intercultural communities. Various approaches to ethics and judgments of what is right and wrong or good and bad are discussed in detail. In addition, we propose three ethical principles which we argue are especially important in intercultural settings.

Chapters 11–17: New Mini Chapters

Chapter 11: What diversity exists in the study of intercultural communication? This chapter provides an overview of the three main theoretical perspectives that exist in the field of

intercultural communication today; interpretive, critical, and traditional. We include an example of an intercultural misunderstanding and discuss how each perspective may approach studying this situation differently.

Chapter 12: How do cultural differences impact our family life? The very idea of what constitutes a family can vary by culture. Families are also the foundational organization for transmitting culture. In this chapter we examine various role relationships as well as discussing how multicultural families face unique challenges and opportunities. We consider some of the tensions that can exist across generations and how issues of identity and race can influence family dynamics.

Chapter 13: What role does culture have in healthcare settings? We look at how culture shapes our way of understanding health and healthcare. We raise a variety of concerns related to healthcare, including racism, health disparities, and how distrust is often found between health providers and members of minority groups within a community. Cultural expectations associated with health-related issues can often result in a variety of conflicts or troublesome outcomes. We review a variety of communication-based factors that can either help or hinder health outcomes.

Chapter 14: How do I lead successfully in intercultural organizations and settings? Given the number of organizations that involve members from diverse backgrounds, understanding how to lead in these settings is becoming increasingly important. We begin by reviewing a variety of leadership dimensions that cross-cultural research has identified as important. We also explore how certain practices and principles may be interpreted very differently across cultures. We then provide some case studies and present a series of take-away messages for potential leaders to consider.

Chapter 15: How is our understanding of the environment influenced by our culture? In this chapter we examine how culture impacts environmental communication as an applied context. Specifically, we consider how communication serves as a resource for mediating relations between humans and nature through pragmatic and constitutive functions. The language we use to frame environmental issues is inherently cultural, both reflecting and shaping that way we think about nature and our environment in general. We use a variety of specific examples to illustrate this. Finally, we look at ecotourism as an emerging opportunity to reconnect with the environment and to provide an opportunity for engaged communication with and about nature for future generations.

Chapter 16: How do cultural differences impact our educational experiences and outcomes? Like other professional settings, education is also heavily influenced by culture. One of the issues we address is the language of education. Not only are there differences in terms of the formal language spoken, like Spanish and Chinese, but the informal way we use language in classroom interactions can vary across communities. One of the growing areas of concern is accessibility in education settings and, using the deaf community, we look at how seeing the cultural nature of this community can change the way education is accessed. We consider how educational norms are not only a reflection of culture, but they also help to shape it.

Chapter 17: How does globalization impact intercultural relationships? The world has become and is becoming increasingly globalized. Technology has enabled us to cut across the traditional limits of time and space and to live and work in a global environment in new and exciting ways. We discuss two important elements of this movement toward a globalized social world; new media (including social media), and popular culture. As with many things, there are both benefits and risks associated with globalization. We explore a variety of these as they relate to intercultural relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What Is Meant by Intercultural Communication?

The humidity was so high the air had become almost visible. Sally squinted down the street at the mirages glistening off the empty road. Sighing, she turned back and studied the patient faces of the half dozen or so people waiting for the bus. Their faces, settled in matching expressions, betrayed none of the impatience that Sally herself felt. She was hot and sweaty.

Sally thought of her friends back in California.

"Women don't sweat," Karen had always said in a mocking tone, "they glow!"

Well, Sally was certainly glowing now. She had been in Western Senegal for three weeks and despite the heat and unpredictability of public transportation, she had been thoroughly enjoying her stay. Things had been happening so fast that she had hardly had time to think. Her Wolof hosts were extremely gracious, catering as best they could to her every need, but she still often found herself feeling ill at ease.

"At times I wish they weren't quite so helpful," she mused and secretly studied the faces of the Wolof around her, searching for traces of the smiles that came so readily to her host family. It was then she noticed the woman sitting on the small bus stop bench, her hands folded carefully on her lap. Sally shifted uncomfortably on her tired feet.

"If that woman were to slide just a little bit either way," she thought, "I could sit down and ease the pressure on this little toe of mine."

Gathering her courage, Sally approached the woman. She knew she didn't speak Wolof perfectly, but her many years of work on the language had allowed her to feel fairly confident in her ability to handle most simple conversations.

She tried to catch the woman's eye and smile as she said in the most polite Wolof she could muster, "Excuse me, please, would you mind sliding over just a bit so that I can sit down?"

The woman, seeming a bit startled, looked at Sally without any of the customary friendliness she had come to expect in her short stay in this beautiful land. Indeed, Sally felt just a bit like some unsavory specimen under observation, but the woman did slide over. Sally nodded politely and sat down. She was just wondering what sort of conversation she might strike up that would ease the awkwardness she felt after making her request of the woman next to her, when she heard the now familiar rumble of a very used double-decker bus.

"Perfect timing," she chuckled to herself and started to move with the rest toward the spot where the bus would stop.

True to most of her bus rides since arriving, the bus was already carrying what seemed to be a full load of passengers. As she waited to find her way into the bus, a Wolof fellow, whom she had noticed standing right

behind the bench when she had asked the woman if she would slide over, leaned toward her and said, "You know, that's not the way we do things around here."

Surprised, she followed the flow of the people into the bus and then turned around to ask just what the fellow had in mind. However, he was nowhere in sight. Obviously, he had gone to the upper deck of the bus upon entering.

"Oh, well," she sighed, "I wonder what that was all about?"[1]

CULTURE

What Sally did not realize at that moment is that it was all about *culture*. We will come back to the incident above, but before doing so we want to explain what we mean when we use the word *culture*.

Culture has been defined in hundreds of ways over the years.[2] Each of these definitions highlights different aspects of culture, and many of the definitions even conflict with each other. The risk with so many definitions is that the definition of culture becomes so broad that it means everything, which results in it meaning nothing for practical purposes. It is important to begin our study of culture and its impact on communication by giving a few specific guidelines regarding just what is and is not being discussed when the word *culture* is used in this text.

Stop for just a moment and ask yourself, "How would I define culture to a friend interested in my study of intercultural communication?" Would you tell your friend that it has to do with values? Traditions? Food? Race? Nationality? Going to the opera? Although we believe all of these are related to culture, the last three could be misleading in terms of what culture means in this book.

If we tell our friends that we are going to do something cultured, chances are they will picture us going to the theatre or a museum, for example. This use of the term culture often leads to notions of *high culture* and *low culture*. High culture includes such things as going to the ballet or other activities often associated with relative wealth and social sophistication. Low culture deals with the common activities of people from a lower economic level. In this book there is no concern for distinguishing between high or low culture, or some idea of people being more or less cultured. So, although attending an opera is doing something of cultural significance, so is meeting friends at the bowling alley, playing soccer, or waiting for a bus with a group of strangers.

Perhaps an even more difficult distinction is that culture is not equivalent to race, ethnicity, or nationality, even though we often use these types of labels in discussing different cultures. We will use them in this book. For a variety of reasons these differences in group memberships often parallel at least some cultural differences. However, simple group membership (based on birth, occupation, and so forth) is not really what we are dealing with. A colleague shared this experience:

> In my interviewing class I had been using an instrument called "The Dove Test," created by a Watts social worker named Adrian Dove, to illustrate the impact of environment on what people know. Mr. Dove had generated about twenty questions that lower-class Blacks living in Watts could answer, but most other people could not. On the day before I intended to use the "test," I discovered that I had misplaced the answers. So I hurried over to the office of the only African American graduate student in the program, Bailey Baker, and asked him to help me generate the correct answers. With a sly smile on his face, he asked me why I thought *he* would know them.[3]

Simply because Mr. Baker is "Black" does not mean that culturally he is the same as all others that may be said to be members of the "Black race." Two people may be quite culturally distinct even though they may be said to belong to the same race or have citizenship in the same country. On the other hand, two individuals who are neither from the same country nor race may, in fact, be culturally similar. This is often due in part to a shared membership in other types of communities, such as religious or professional communities. So the question is, "What are we dealing with when we consider the notion of culture?"

Culture is defined for our discussion as a *historically shared system of symbolic resources through which we make our world meaningful*. To help bring this definition alive, we will explain and give an example of each of the key terms in the definition.

System

At the core of this definition is the idea that a culture is a system. To help you get a better sense of how a system works, let us ask you to apply the mathematical system with which you are familiar to the following five problems:

1 1 + 1 = 2
2 7 + 5 = 12
3 11 + 3 = 2
4 6 + 3 = 9
5 8 + 9 = 5

Which of the five problems just noted are performed correctly? Most of you would probably agree that problems 1, 2, and 4 are correct and that problems 3 and 5 are wrong. Most of us gained the ability to differentiate between right and wrong with problems like these when we were quite young. However, if you were to change the system you used to look at

these problems, you may realize that they are all equally true. Take a minute and look at the problems. Do you see the system that would make each of these equally true? It is a system with which we are sure you are very familiar and one you use virtually every day of your life. We'll let you think about it for a moment before explaining what system we have in mind.

We are surrounded by systems. There is the legal system, the educational system, the solar system, and the parking system at your school, to name just a few. In fact, our bodies are systems made up of various other systems, like the immune system. In short, *a system is any group of elements that are organized in such a way that the elements are able to do things they couldn't do individually*. Water and various minerals may be elements that make up the human body, but it is the way these elements are combined that gives the human body its form and ability to perform certain tasks. Although there are differences across each human body, there is enough of a consistent pattern in the way the elements are organized that we can recognize a human from a tree even though many of the basic elements are the same.

Another system is our timekeeping system. This system uses a base 12 (rather than the traditional base 10) and is commonly understood in reference to 12-hour clocks. For example, if it is 11:00 and Patricia says meet me in three hours, you know without thinking too much that she wants you to meet her at 2:00. Of course, if it is 1:00 and she says meet me in one hour, it will also be 2:00. It is this time system that we use every day that makes each of the five equations above equally true. Even though this is a common system and one easily understood, it is typically difficult to see at first if we are thinking in terms of the base-10 system we often use when we see addition and equal signs. If we had written 11:00 plus three hours equals 2:00, most people would have agreed that our equation was right to begin with.

This simple example using our time system illustrates two very important functions of any system. Systems serve to both (1) *enable* us to do things and (2) *constrain* us from doing things, whether that be finding a parking space, deciding what to eat, or deciding if something is either right or wrong. We need systems to share ideas as humans or coordinate our actions to accomplish virtually any social task. However, although systems make it possible to have meaningful interaction with other humans, they also constrain us from seeing or understanding some of the possibilities that exist for us and others.

Let's return to the story of Sally that began this chapter. Sally was confused by the gentleman's critique of her actions. In her mind, she had been as polite as possible. The difficulty arose from Sally's assumption that there was just one system for making polite requests. The same may be said for the Wolof, who thought of Sally as rude rather than polite. In fact, there were two different systems for making polite requests operating in the opening story. The opening story is based on the experiences of Judith Irvine and prompted a discovery process that revealed some basic differences in the ways U.S. Americans[4] and Wolof go about making such requests.[5]

First, Americans tend to word requests in such a way that they focus on whether the person being asked wants to do whatever is being requested. For the Wolof this focus on the personal whims or desires of the person being addressed seems strange. If some aspect outside of the request itself needs to be the focus, the Wolof would see the demands of the social situation as more appropriate. In the case described, the situation obviously required that the woman would slide over, so there was no reason to focus on the willingness of the person being asked to slide over.

Second, the Wolof are not as comfortable with talking to strangers as Americans and do not value talk as a way to get to know a stranger in the same degree as Americans. Thus, when Sally made her request in a way that ended with a question that seemed to invite further conversation, it seemed both awkward and strange to the Wolof woman and overly forward to the Wolof man.

Finally, in the Wolof community there is an informal norm that signals the type and importance of the request. Your typical, everyday sort of request is asked in a very simple format. The syntax, or sentence structure, tends to be short and straightforward. Requests that use elaborate sentence structure, such as the "Excuse me, please, would you mind…" used by Sally, are reserved for those requests that are very special and important to the requester. Thus, the woman looked at Sally strangely because here was this foreigner who seemed to be indicating a desire for conversation, while almost being insulting by acting like the woman's sliding depended purely upon her good will when, in fact, it was obviously required in the situation. To top it off, she acted like this simple sliding over was some huge, important request. Perhaps she was thinking, "Foreigners, who knows what to expect from them." Irvine's research demonstrates that for Sally to have been perceived as a normal, polite person she should have just said, "Slide over."

Historically Shared

Culture refers to systems that are shared. This sharing allows members to communicate with each other in relatively efficient and effective ways. This sharing is also related to issues of identity. A shared history or tradition gives people one answer to the question, "Who am I?" This aspect of culture is illustrated in part by the following story from one of our students.

The year is 1970 and the place is Texas. My grandfather is the manager for a local gas station. On a sunny afternoon, a woman drives into the station and requests that four new tires be placed on her car. Although this woman could not produce the money to pay for these tires, my grandpa gave them to her anyway on the condition that she would faithfully pay him back in small installments each week. The woman, being very grateful, agreed to this arrangement and drove away with her new tires. Weeks passed by and the woman did not return. My grandpa would occasionally see her out and ask her about the money. Her reply was always, "Oh, I don't have it with me now, but I'll get it to you next week."

Three months passed and the woman still did not repay her debt. One day the woman drove past the gas station and into a nearby parking lot. My grandpa saw the woman get out of her car and walk into a store. Immediately my grandpa rolled a car jack over to her car, lifted it up and began to remove the tires. Minutes later the woman exited the store and to her dismay saw the tires being removed.

"What are you doing with my tires?" she exclaimed.

"Actually," my grandpa stated, "these are my tires and I'm taking them back because they are not paid for."

As he bent back down to collect the remaining tires, the woman opened her purse and began to write a check. "I'm sorry ma'am, but I won't accept your check," my grandpa said firmly. The woman, looking very stressed, then dug again into her purse and produced the right amount of cash to pay off the bill. My grandfather gladly accepted the money and put the tires back onto her car.

My grandpa passed away one year after I was born so I never had the opportunity to meet him. No matter how many times I hear this story, it makes me laugh. I am astonished at how bold my grandpa was… I can see in my own family these values being modeled by my father and mother. Fortunately, they insisted on passing them along to their children. My grandpa may have passed away more than twenty years ago, but his memory lives in the family stories that are told.[6]

Sharing of family stories is just one way in which culture is passed along. However, this account also highlights some basic aspects of culture. As this student shares this story with

siblings and other family members, a sense of who they are becomes clearer. As one student noted, family narratives are an expression of one's life. This did not have to be a *family* story, however, for it to have an influence on identity. Within a political group, nation, or some other community of people, we hear stories and get information that tells us who we are and what we act like as a group. We certainly are not bound by this knowledge, but it does teach us (often without even seeming to) what is normal and expected for people like us.

This student did not actually have to know and remember her grandpa for him to have an influence on how she thought and acted. Because this story has been retold, it is easy for her to see how her grandpa's actions have come to be reflected in her own life and the lives of her parents. Yet the cultural sharing implied in this story is not limited to family members. This story takes place within a community of people who allow and understand such actions. The experience is just one example of a pattern of actions that influence what will be seen as acceptable in the future and are themselves made understandable by decisions from the past. Culture, therefore, gives us identity building blocks and connects us with people we have never seen, be they individuals who are alive right now, who have lived before us, or will live after us.

Of course, the connections that we share with one person are different from those we share with others and the nature of these connections will change over time. We all belong to many different cultural communities, whether they are related to our families, our occupations, our nationalities, our religious or social affiliations, and so on. Although reasonably stable, these shared memberships are not static in nature. Sometimes a group of immigrants will try to *freeze* their culture in an effort not to lose it in a new land, but this practice invariably leads to surprise and often disappointment when they get a chance to return to their homeland years later.[7] Just as history is always in the process of being created in the lives we lead, so culture is always open to change. These changes are connected with what has gone before and will influence what will come in the future, but cultures are inherently in flux.

Symbolic Resources

Now that we know that culture is a *historically shared system*, we need to understand just what constitutes this system. Our cultural systems are made up of symbols that serve as resources that help us to interact with each other in meaningful ways. When we say that something is symbolic, this usually suggests that it stands for something else. If we use the word (and symbol) *tree* in a conversation, it stands for a plant in the physical world. This is a fairly easy connection to see, even though it may provide problems for understanding given the many different types of trees that exist. However, when symbols represent things that are much less tangible, such as *beauty* and *freedom*, the problems are magnified.

In the United States there has been at times quite a bit of controversy over whether it is okay to burn the American flag. Without trying to get into the merits of the various arguments surrounding this issue, it is clear that many of the problems related to this controversy are due to the symbolic nature of what is done when a flag is burned. The flag represents the United States and the principles upon which the United States as a political entity is based. Thus, burning the flag, whether it is in the United States or in Iran, is not simply destroying a piece of cloth. It is making a statement about a way of life. Some argue that the burning itself is symbolic of the freedoms that exist in the United States and others feel that the burning represents an effort to destroy those freedoms. Symbols can change over time. For example, if you saw an American flag flying in the back of a pick-up truck during the U.S. general election in 2020 you probably got a very different message impression than if you had seen the same thing in 2001 right after "9/11." Thus, symbolic acts are open to change and great differences of interpretation.

FIGURE 1.2

Symbols Carry Powerful Connotations: The burning of a nation's flag often evokes emotions beyond what might be expected if just a plain piece of cloth were burned

There are two characteristics of symbols everywhere that make these differences of opinion a natural part of our world. Symbols are *arbitrary* and *conventional*. The word *symbol* is derived from the Greek terms *bolos*, meaning to throw, and *sym*, meaning with or together. Thus, from its beginning the notion of symbol referred to something being just thrown together. The English symbol for one physical object you may be sitting upon is *chair*, the Spanish symbol for that same object is *silla*, whereas the Japanese symbol for this object we sit on is *isu*. Is one of these the real and correct symbol for that physical object and all the others wrong? Of course not. In a way, this supports the old idea that a rose smells as sweet regardless of what it is called. Because there is no necessary connection between the symbol *rose* and the physical flowers we associate with that symbol, it would smell just as sweet even if we called it "tuna."

Before going too far with this idea of symbols as arbitrary, it is crucial that we remember that symbols are also conventional. Something that is conventional is agreed upon by a group of people. The symbol *rose* is connected with a particular type of flower because a group of people have agreed that such a connection should be made and have passed down that connection. Because these connections are arbitrary, however, they can and do change over time. Think how the symbols *weed*, *gay*, *righteous*, and *bad* have changed over time because groups of people have agreed to these changes. How these types of changes occur is an interesting focus of study.

Our earlier suggestion of substituting the symbol *tuna* for the symbol *rose* probably did not seem very attractive to you. Each symbol has a multitude of connotations or informal meanings associated with it that have the power to change our perceptions. Thus, a rose by any other name (say tuna) might not immediately smell as sweet. The power of conventional meanings to influence our physical perceptions is evident, and it may interest the reader to know that the symbol *tuna* was, in fact, part of what might be viewed as a positive change

in symbol use. The fish that we commonly represent with the symbol or word *tuna* used to be called *horse mackerel*. Because of the conventional meanings associated with *horse* and to a lesser extent *mackerel*, the marketing of this fish in the United States was problematic. Americans don't like to eat anything associated with horses. The use of the word *tuna* and its acceptance in representing a certain type of fish was a major part of the marketing success of what we now call tuna.

It is the conventional aspect of symbols that gives them, and culture in general, a sense of stability and consistency. Indeed, although some playing with the conventional meanings of symbols is allowed and even appreciated, if you constantly use symbols in unconventional ways, you will likely be locked up or in some other way removed from society. On the other hand, it is the arbitrariness of symbols that gives culture its dynamic and changeable quality. The fact that culture is a symbolic system gives culture both the power to change and the power over change. This ongoing tension about change is at the heart of many debates in the social sciences as scholars seek to understand these seemingly opposing characteristics of culture.

The definition of culture, however, does not simply refer to symbols, but to symbolic resources. A resource is anything that allows one to do something. Land, money, fame, athletic ability, and an attractive face can all be resources in the right setting. Symbolic resources may be tangible, such as a flag, or intangible concepts, such as freedom. The key is that these resources are both arbitrary and conventional and they help those who share them accomplish certain tasks, the most basic of which are to *share meaning* and *coordinate* multiple *actions*.

One specific task is greeting other people. One resource for greeting we have heard is the phrase, "Hey, what's up?" In England in certain settings involving royalty the phrase, "Your Highness," is part of an appropriate greeting. These resources are each only part of a system so they are not equally appropriate at all times. Indeed, try greeting a few people today with a combination of these resources, "Hey, what's up, Your Highness?" We suspect that you will get some responses that indicate its inappropriateness. Again, though, the setting is an important part of the overall system. Think of the different impact this greeting might have if you used it with a supervisor at work, a parent, a best friend, an unknown teenager at a mall, or the professor in your next class.

Another common resource for greeting someone in the United States is the question, "Hi, how are you?" The question serves as a way to acknowledge another person in a friendly way. It is not meant to be taken as a literal request for specific information and it is often said in passing. In fact, attempts to tell someone how you really are will usually result in confusion or frustration for all involved. This resource for greeting is not simply a matter of language, such that all English speakers share the same resources or all Spanish or Russian speakers and so on. Instead, it is the way a group of people *use* the language they have. A woman who recently moved to the United States from England told Brad that she is constantly frustrated by that question. She is torn by the sense that either she is rude in not really answering the question or the other person is rude in asking without real intent. For her, a brief comment about the weather, such as, "A bit fresh, eh?" (meaning it is quite cold) or "Lovely bit of weather, eh?" would much better accomplish the need to connect briefly with the other person.

One American realized just how frustrated so many international students are by these unfamiliar resources for doing the simple task of greeting. She shared with Brad that when she started working in Korea she was constantly asked in passing, "*Odi-ga-seyo*?" which literally means, "Where are you going?" She was confused and a bit paranoid at first. "It's none of their business," she thought, and besides no one seemed all that excited when she tried to tell them. Eventually she learned that the phrase, "Where are you going?" served much the same purpose as, "How are you?" in the United States. Instead of responding with "fine" and

going on, she just needed to respond with "over there" and go on. The systems of symbolic resources we use to do simple things like greet people, go out on a date, celebrate a holiday with family, or make a request at work are all examples of culture.

Make Our World Meaningful

Now that we have a feeling for the symbolic resources that make up culture, our next concern is with what this system of resources does for us. In a broad sense it makes our lives meaningful. Although the main focus of this section will be on the idea of meaning, we do want to comment briefly on the "make our world" part of the definition. Cultures are the creation of human interaction. Culture is something we learn; we are not born with it. Any human baby can learn the culture of any community. Cultures, as noted earlier, are both stable and changing. As people discuss past issues, invent new technologies, and so forth, common understandings can and do change. Thus, as we discuss culture in this text it is important to remember that we are talking about something that can and does change, even though it is often difficult to pinpoint when and where that change occurred.

The last part of this definition concerns what culture as a shared symbolic system does for us. It provides us a way to act meaningfully and a way to understand the behaviors of others as meaningful. To say that some human behavior, or any other aspect of this world, is meaningful is to assume that the significance of that behavior or object is shared. Meaning may be classified into three components; selection, organization, and evaluation.[8]

Selection

Selection refers to those things we pick out to notice. At any given time there are always many more things to notice than we actually do. This selection process is learned and is often at the root of intercultural problems. Part of the problem is that humans do not always perceive things accurately. For example; in Figure 1.3, which is bigger, the middle circle in A or in B? Although to most people B looks bigger, they are the same.
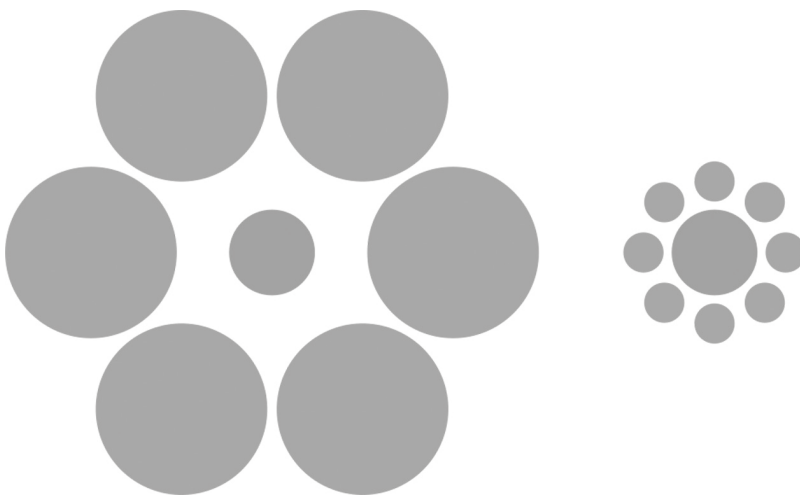

FIGURE 1.3
Perception Check

However, the main challenge with the selection process in intercultural communication is that it does not involve easy right or wrong answers, but involves a difference in what is selected to notice in the first place. Each selection may be equally correct depending on the background and needs of those doing the perceiving.

Sometimes this selection process is embedded in the words we use. If we ask someone in English if it is okay if our brother comes with us, they would *know* that the person we are referring to is male and is related to the person speaking, probably through birth. However, if we make this same request in Thai, those listening will also know if that person is younger or older than the person speaking. That is because relative age is also embedded in the symbols that we would use if we were speaking Thai, just as gender is embedded in the English term *brother*. The selection process can be especially difficult when what is being selected or perceived is not tangible. In Japan the emotion *amae* is a very normal and important emotion; however, there is no one-word translation in English for this concept. Efforts to translate the concept often deal with a bittersweet sense of dependency, true of some parent–child relations, but there always seems to be the sense that the definition is somehow lacking. In contrast, there is no one-word translation in Japanese for the American concept of *privacy*. The somewhat common idea that someone just needs a little privacy is a hard concept to explain clearly in Japanese. Looking at a particular relationship problem, an American may see (select out) the need for privacy, whereas the Japanese may see *amae*. Their different backgrounds and cultural knowledge make it very likely for certain aspects of a situation to be noticed and others to not even be recognized.

Even when the selection process appears to point toward the same thing, problems can arise. We have heard the following story passed on at various meetings associated with intercultural trainers. We do not know if it really happened or just illustrates this point well.

An intercultural specialist was conducting some training for a multinational group and was discussing differing values. To do this he introduced a value exercise. This exercise involved pretending that you were on a sinking ship and there was only one life raft left. You had to go on it and you could only take one other person or you would all die. The other person would have to be either your mother or your wife. Thus, the problem was already selected for all the participants. Two of the participants, a British fellow and a man from Saudi Arabia, both quickly remarked that it was an easy choice. The trainer asked the Saudi who he would choose and he said that he would pick his mother, of course. The British fellow immediately complained that the wife should be the choice because as much as you loved your mother, she had lived a full life and your wife was your chosen companion throughout your future life. The Saudi disagreed, stating, "You can always get a new wife, but you only have one mother."

Both men perceived the need to make a choice between their mother and their wife, but it is obvious that the interpretations of this situation, and thus their choices, were very different. These differences were, in part, the result of organizing the concepts of mother and wife differently.

Organization

Organization refers to the connections we make between things that allow us to interpret what is going on. We understand things in reference to other things. If we were to ask you to explain what is meant by the symbol *mother*, chances are that you would talk about things like giving birth, nurturing, teaching, loving, and so forth. All of these explanations are based

on relationships to other people and things. We do not know what a mother is in isolation from other concepts. The same is true for any symbol, idea, or concept. We do not know what they are except in relation to how they connect to other concepts. We referred to the symbol *chair* a bit earlier. To understand what a chair is, we need to know about the idea of sitting, how a chair compares to other furniture, and so forth.

When you encounter any situation, you are constantly making connections to understand what is going on. Stephen Barley discusses how the meanings conveyed through these connections are manipulated in many funeral homes in the United States.[9] Funeral directors are often faced with the need to help control unusual behaviors or reactions resulting from the stress related to the death of a loved one. One way of doing this is to make the funeral scenes appear more normal. For example, the dead body is treated in a way that suggests peaceful rest. Before the body is allowed to be viewed it has the mouth wired shut, the eyes stitched together, and it is laid in a coffin, the inside of which often resembles a very nice bed with a soft pillow. Because this is done the person looks like she or he is sleeping and a subtle message of peaceful rest is conveyed so that the shock of death is somewhat moderated.

Evaluation

Evaluation refers to the judgments of worth and value that are based on our interpretations. Virtually at the same moment that we select certain elements and organize them into a meaningful situation or scenario, we will get the feeling that the actions are good or bad, right or wrong, and so forth. One effective way to start to look for cultural differences is to pay attention to the feelings of anger, annoyance, and so forth that arise when we evaluate something we see in a negative way. Indeed, Agar argues that culture itself is only really meaningful in situations where problems exist.[10] The following is an example of such a problem.

A person from India living in the United States ran into a problem when she had an eye infection. She was told at the clinic by one doctor that she had iritis and that she needed steroid drops. However, in going through the process to get these drops she was told by the optometrist that she simply had contact lens overuse and that she should just let it alone and that it would heal in a couple of days. Over a week later it still had not healed.

She then visited with a friend who was in the medical profession. This friend said that it was indeed iritis. The friend had recently seen another case just like hers. The friend, who was not officially an "eye" doctor, told her to go to a different eye doctor and get re-diagnosed. When the woman from India asked how much this might cost, she was told around 100 dollars. Because finances were tight she wondered out loud if there was any other way. Her friend told her that she could write a prescription for the drops, but would not feel comfortable doing so since that was not her official area of expertise. The Indian woman did not directly ask her friend to write the prescription because a friend would not impose that way on another friend, but she fully expected her friend to volunteer to write the prescription. The friend did not. Instead, she reiterated her advice to see another doctor.

The woman from India became frustrated and hurt; in her opinion her friend knew that she was in pain and low on funds. Her friend had the ability to cure her, but did not offer to help. The friend was following professional medical ethics, but in this woman's mind real friends did anything they could to help each other, including ignoring formal rules.

The Indian's woman's interpretation of what a friend is led her to evaluate negatively what her friend felt were very appropriate actions. In fact, she no longer considers the other person a *friend*.

See if you can pick out all three of the elements of meaning—selection, organization, and evaluation—at work in the example that follows.

The reception for the visiting officials had been going quite well, thought Fred. The food and drink were excellent and the conversations had been growing progressively livelier. Fred was interrupted from his moment of reflection by Manuel, a lecturer at a local university here in Manila. He liked Manuel. As a consultant to the Philippines Department of Education, Fred had gotten to know many of the teachers. Manuel had always seemed open and honest and a very clear thinker.

Drink in hand, Manuel nudged Fred and with a little smile quietly asked Fred who he thought was the most beautiful woman in the place.

Fred laughed a little bit, but was willing to play along, so surveying the room, he noticed a woman dressed in black standing over by the food table. He had noticed her earlier in the evening and pointed to her now.

"Who?" asked Manuel, a bit confused.

Trying not to be too obvious, Fred again pointed to the woman in black.

"Who?" Manuel asked again, now sounding a bit impatient.

Fred was amazed. How could he not see her? "That woman right there dressed in black," he exclaimed a bit louder than he had planned.

"Her?" asked Manuel in disbelief. "Why, she's just a server; I'm asking you about women!"

Feeling a bit confused and awkward, Fred stammered a little apology of some kind and quickly excused himself to go mingle with other guests. However, at the end of the evening he still felt uncomfortable about his exchange with Manuel.[11]

The situation described illustrates the three concepts of selection, organization, and evaluation just discussed. Both Fred and Manuel thought they were selecting out women, but the lower status of the woman in black made her virtually invisible to Manuel. Thus, she was unavailable to be part of a pattern that could be interpreted as beautiful women. Fred believed Manuel's interpretation that the server was not a "woman" was wrong. At the same time Fred's selection and classification of the woman in black as beautiful was also frustrating and inappropriate for Manuel.

In summary, culture is the system that encourages us to select out certain features of a social scene and make sense of the scene by showing how its elements are related, and to make judgments based on the perceived worth of the pattern we discern.

Reflection Question: In what ways does the definition of culture fit or not fit with the one you had in your own mind before reading this chapter?

COMMUNICATION

For our purposes in this book, communication refers to the *generation of meaning*. This general definition follows a social constructivist perspective in which meanings are generated as humans work out the meanings of different messages. This interpretive process goes on regardless of whether the messages are verbal or nonverbal, delivered in person or over some mass-mediated pathway. Of course, the term communication is also subject to cultural nuances. In the United States, one often hears about "communication breakdowns," a "lack

of communication," and the "need to communicate." These phrases generally do not convey that meaning has not been generated or that, in a dictionary sense, communication has not occurred. Instead, they mean that the type of communication that has taken place is not valued positively by those making these comments.

If a husband and wife finish a conversation by yelling at each other and blaming each other for all their problems, or a person raises an important topic with a friend and the friend just ignores it and changes the subject, many people in the world claim that there has been a lack of communication even though meaning has been generated. Tamar Katriel and Gerry Philipsen claim that for an interaction to really be considered communication, that interaction must be supportive, close, and flexible.[12] They further identify a four-step process that must be followed for it to be said in some American communities that two people have really communicated. First, one person must raise a topic that is important to him or her; second, the other person must somehow acknowledge the legitimacy of that topic; third, there must be a sharing of ideas on that topic; fourth, the people involved must end the conversation in a way that indicates they are both good people, a kind of "I'm okay, you're okay" feeling. If any one of these steps is not followed, there will be the perception that there was a lack of communication, regardless of how many meanings were generated and transmitted during the interaction. This specific form of "communication" is not equally valued across all cultures.

In spite of the many cultural differences in communication, there are two features of communication that we assume in this text are true in all cultures. Communication is interdependent and situational.

Interdependent

In much of our thinking in the West we like to imagine the world as made up of simple cause and effect types of relationships. This is reflected in the social sciences by the use of independent and dependent variables in explaining human behavior. Independent variables cause certain reactions in dependent variables. This is reflected in many models of communication. The speaker is typically seen as an independent variable who persuades, informs, or entertains the listener or dependent variable. Then when the listener becomes the speaker, to provide feedback and so forth, he or she becomes the independent variable and the roles are reversed. Much of the communication training that takes place uses this model. It assumes that if there is a problem in the interaction, one just needs to learn how to be more persuasive, more clear, or more humorous.

These models, even in allowing for feedback, often distort the communication process by ignoring the fact that people are simultaneously having an impact on each other. This impact is not so much A causing B, but A and B influencing each other's choices continually and often without conscious recognition. Even though we may have planned on giving the same lecture to two different groups, it will never really go exactly the same. Each particular interaction is different because it is interdependent or reliant on the particular people involved. The nature and direction of any communication event is always influenced by the choices of each party involved with the communication. Even if that choice is silence. This happens even in what seems like only one-way communication, like a drill sergeant giving orders. The degree of attention by the privates influences (but does not determine) the way in which the drill sergeant gives the orders.

This interdependence is important to remember because it changes how we view intercultural problems. A statement like, "She sure made me mad" is an obvious distortion and not a very useful one. Although she may have encouraged feelings of anger, one would have had to make a choice to be angry in response to her actions. At different times the exact

same behaviors result in anger and sometimes in other reactions. If someone were to "flip us off" while we were driving on a freeway, we may choose to be angry, to laugh, or even to feel sorry for that person, depending on our mood and the situation. This is important to remember in intercultural communication because it means we can never just give up by laying all the blame on one party. Like the old saying, "It takes two to fight," we always have to see what we can do to help the situation, but we do not shoulder the full blame for misunderstandings. Sometimes, though, as we will see in later examples, certain parties contribute more than their equal share to the misunderstanding because of their relative position of power.

Situational

Communication, or the meanings generated in any given interaction, is always to a certain degree influenced by the situation. When we assess meaning it is always in reference to some context. Take, for example, the word phrase, "I love you, too." When a person says that to her or his mother, it has a different meaning than when the person says it to a significant other and yet a third different connotation when a person uses it a friend. Further, if a person is on the freeway and that driver we mentioned cuts the person off and shows a particular finger (meant to offend), the responding comment, "I love you, too," has another quite different meaning. Even though the words have remained the same, the context modifies the meanings that are generated. Because each culture organizes contextual features differently, we must always try to understand the native context.
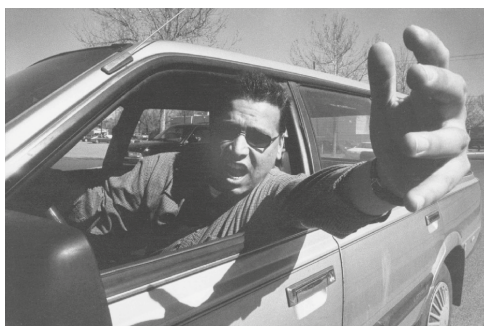

FIGURE 1.4
The Phrase "I love you, too" Can Have Very Different Meanings (depending upon the situation)
Source: Miguel Gandert