

GREGORIO BILLIKOPF, University of California
Party-Directed Mediation: Helping Others Resolve Differences
© 2009 Regents of the University of California
gebillikopf@ucdavis.edu, (209) 525-6800

APPENDICES

Appendix I

Cultural Differences?



© Gregorio Billikopf, Varonezh, Russia, 1993

In 1993, I had my first opportunity to visit Russia as a representative of the University of California. I was there to provide assistance in the area of agricultural labor management. “Russians are a very polite people,” I had been tutored before my arrival. One of my interpreters explained that, in Russia, a

gentleman will pour the *limonad* (a type of juice) for the ladies and show other courtesies.

Towards the end of my three-week visit, I was invited out to dinner by my young Russian host and friend, Nicolai Vasilevich, and his lovely wife, Yulya. At the end of a wonderful meal, Yulya asked if I would like a banana. I politely declined, thanked her, and explained I was most *satisfied* with the meal. But the whole while, my mind was racing: “What should I do? Should I offer her a banana, even though they are as close to her as they are to me? What is the *polite* thing to do?”

“Would *you* like a banana?” I asked Yulya.

“Yes,” she smiled but made no attempt to take any of the bananas in the fruit basket. “What now?” I thought.

“Which one would you like?” I fumbled.

“That one,” she said, pointing at one of the bananas. All the while thinking about Russian politeness, I picked up the banana Yulya had selected. It was a matter of great anguish to me whether I should hand her the banana or peel it for her. What was the polite thing to do? At length, I decided to peel the banana halfway and hand it to her. Yulya’s and Nicolai’s kind smiles told me I had done the right thing. After this experience, I let the world know that in Russia, gentlemen, the polite thing is to *peel the bananas for the ladies*. Sometime during my third trip, I was politely disabused of my notion.

“Oh, no, Grigorii Davidovich,” a Russian graciously corrected me. “In Russia, when a man peels a banana for a lady, it means he has a *romantic* interest in her.” How embarrassed I felt. Here I had been proudly telling everyone this tidbit of cultural understanding.

David, my oldest son, had occasion to travel to the Ukraine for a brief student exchange a few years later. My family subsequently had the opportunity to host a number of Ukrainian youths and adult leaders in our home. Bananas were among the popular snacks. I noticed that our Ukrainian guests were peeling the bananas from the flower end rather than the stem end. I thought, “They have never eaten a banana before!” I felt an impulse to correct our guests, but fortunately I recovered my

reason. I decided, instead, to peel my own banana from the flower end. It was easier than doing so from the stem end. The banana did not care, and it tasted just as good.

Certain lessons must be learned the hard way. Some well-intended articles and presentations on cultural differences have the potential to do more harm than good. They present, like my bananas, though perhaps less amusingly, too many generalizations or a distorted view.

Here is an attempt to sort out some of my thoughts on cultural differences. My perspective is that of a foreign-born-and-raised Hispanic male who has now lived for more than three decades in the United States and has had much opportunity for international travel and cultural exchange.

Besides being a native Chilean, I have met, taught, been taught by, roomed with, studied with, worked for, worked with, been supervised by, supervised, conducted research on, and been friends with Hispanics from every social class and almost every Spanish-speaking country in the world.

Frequent generalizations about the Hispanic culture include claims that Hispanics need less personal space, make less eye contact, touch each other more in conversation, and are less likely to participate during a meeting. Stereotypes are often dangerously wrong and can lead to contention. This is especially so when accompanied by recommendations such as: move closer when talking to Hispanics, make more physical contact, do not expect participation, and so on.

COMMONALITY OF HUMANKIND

Differences among the people of any given nation or culture are much greater than differences between groups. Education, social standing, religion, personality, belief structure, past experience, affection shown in the home, and countless other factors influence human behavior and culture.

Some have felt that by focusing on commonality, I am minimizing real distinctions among people. Certainly, there is a place for studies that focus on differences. Deborah Tannen, for instance, weighs in on the dissimilarities between the sexes:

“Pretending that women and men are the same hurts women . . . It also hurts men who, with good intentions, speak to women as they would to men, and are nonplussed when their words don’t work as they expected, or even spark resentment and anger.” Furthermore, Tannen says, “The risk of ignoring differences is greater than the danger of naming them.”¹

I am an avid reader of Tannen’s writings. I certainly would encourage continued studies about cultural and gender divergences. Published research on the latter currently seems to be more up-to-date.

In carrying out my own studies, I have come across a substantial number of individuals who explain how they conform to some of the stereotypes of their nationality, subculture, or gender, but not to others.

While there are real cultural variations to be found everywhere—there are organizational cultures, family cultures, religious cultures, big-city cultures, and sport cultures, just to name a few—there is a danger in acting on generalizations.

Surely there are differing approaches as to what is considered polite and appropriate behavior on and off the job, including:

- Length of pleasantries and greetings before getting down to business
- Level of tolerance for someone speaking a foreign language
- Loudness of conversations in restaurants or public places (i.e., appropriateness of attracting attention to oneself)
- Politeness, measured in terms of gallantry or etiquette (e.g., standing up for a woman who approaches a table, yielding a seat on a bus to an older person, etc.)
- Style of dress
- Method of food preparation
- Taste in music

In México, it is customary for the person who is *arriving* to greet others. Someone who walks into a group of people who are eating would say *provecho* (enjoy your meal). In Chile, women regularly greet both women and men with a kiss on the cheek. In Russia, women often walk arm-in-arm with their female friends. In some cultures, “yes” means “I hear you” more than “I agree.”



© Gregorio Billikopf, Voronezh, Russia, 1993

In Russia, women often walk arm-in-arm with their female friends. In Chile, women regularly greet both women and men with a kiss on the cheek. In some cultures, “yes” means “I hear you” more than “I agree.”

Paying attention to customs and cultural differences can give someone outside a culture a better chance of assimilation or acceptance. Ignoring differences can get an unsuspecting person into trouble.

There *are* cultural and ideological differences, and it is good to have an understanding of a culture's customs and ways. However, acting on stereotypes about such matters as eye contact, personal space, touch, and interest in participation can have serious negative consequences.

CROSS-CULTURAL AND STATUS BARRIERS

Sometimes, assertions about cultural differences are based on scientific observation. Argyle cites several studies on nonverbal communication that indicate Latin Americans make more eye contact, face each other more, and touch more when they speak.² Strong eye contact by Hispanics generally goes along with my observations. If Hispanics face each other more, it is probably because of the desire for eye contact.

The eyes reflect so much of what a person is feeling. Eyes reveal both liking and genuine interest. While voice tonal qualities convey a large amount of information, the eyes provide key additional data.

Occasionally, I have found an individual who avoids eye contact, but this is the exception rather than the rule. Within some Hispanic subcultures, individuals tend to avoid eye contact when their personal space is violated, as when they are greeting another person. However, in other Hispanic subcultures, strong eye contact is maintained during similar circumstances.

Avoidance of eye contact is partly a factor of shyness; partly a measure of how safe a person feels around another; and partly an expression of power differential norms in certain subcultures.

This is not to say that one can count on any sort of uniformity. I am acquainted with a successful Mexican American attorney who was taught by her mother—through verbal instruction and example—to avoid eye contact with unfamiliar men as a matter of modesty. She grew up in humble circumstances within a religious family in a *rancho* in México. In contrast, I interviewed a Mexican woman, also from the *rancho*, who had not received this type of instruction nor heard of anyone who had.

Reasons for reduced eye contact, then, may include (1) multitasking (e.g., reading or driving while carrying on a

conversation), (2) shyness, (3) flirting, (4) modesty, (5) acknowledgment that body space has been violated (sometimes called *interpersonal overload*), (6) intimidation, (7) depression, (8) anxiety, (9) dislike, and (10) embarrassment.

I have been married since 1976 to a Californian of northern European descent—and with a Canadian connection. My wife now realizes that I need to have eye contact while we converse. If she is reading, for example, she has learned that I stop speaking when she breaks eye contact with me. My children still give me a hard time about the year my mother came to visit and we drove to Yosemite National Park. They were all panicked because I kept looking at my mother as I drove. They felt I was not looking at the road enough and would drive off a cliff.

Cross-cultural observations can easily be tainted by other factors. Perceived status differences can create barriers between cultures and even within organizations. Individuals encountering this status differential must show, by word and action, that they value the potential contributions of others.

I do not believe that Hispanics touch more, with the exception of greetings. One of the studies described by Argyle showed that Latin Americans stand closer than North Americans (something that goes contrary to my observations) but that there are regional variations. Argyle asserts that there are few genuine cross-cultural studies of spatial behavior. Interestingly, yet another study showed that “middle-class Americans actually touched quite a lot” and that the U.S. is more of a contact culture than people think.³

After moving to the U.S., for a long time I was also guilty of broad generalizations about those born in the States. While I have not conquered this disagreeable human inclination, I feel I am beginning to see the way. Often, observations on cultural differences are based on *our own weakness* and reflect our inability to connect with others.

As a young man, I found myself in an almost entirely Anglo-Saxon community in New Canaan, Connecticut. I remember that on several occasions I felt my personal space was being invaded and wondered how Anglo-Saxon men could tolerate being so

close to each other. After all these years, I still feel uncomfortable sitting as close to other men as is often dictated by chair arrangements in the U.S. I am not the exception that proves the rule. Immigrants from México and Iran have mentioned feeling the same way.

Jill Heiken, an HRnet forum participant, explained her learning process this way: “I’ve taught ESL to many many different nationalities and lived in rooming situations with people from all nations and lived in Japan and Cambodia . . . It took me a long time not to generalize, and now when I hear others doing so . . . I know they are just beginning to ‘wade in the river,’ so to speak, of intercultural relations.”

At times it may appear that some people, especially when there are social or ethnic differences, do not participate and interact as easily. This is not because they do not have ideas to contribute, but rather because they may need a little convincing that their ideas are valued. Once the floodgate is opened, the ideas will flow.

In some subcultures, once a person has given an opinion in a group setting, others are unlikely to contradict it. There are organizational boards whose members are asked for opinions in order of reverse seniority, thus increasing the chances that all members will speak freely. Certainly, setting up the discussion from the outset as one in which the opinions of all present are welcome can be very fruitful.

Historically, Americans have been welcome in most of the predominately Hispanic-populated countries in the Americas. With a few exceptions, they are looked up to and treated deferentially. This polite treatment should not be mistaken for weakness, disinterest, or subservience. Studies conducted decades ago showed African American children preferred to play with dolls that had Caucasian features. This has been changing, as African Americans are less likely to discount their own contributions.⁴

I believe Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic minorities are also valuing their contributions more than in the past, and so subservient behaviors are less likely to be observed. Only through

equality of respect among ethnic groups, cultures, and nations can we reach positive international relations in this global economy—as well as peace at home. Cultural and ethnic stereotypes do little to foster equality.

Breaking through cultural, age, or status barriers can take time and effort. The amount of exertion will depend on many factors, including the skill of the individual reaching out and how alienated and disengaged from the mainstream the person being sought feels.

For example, in East Africa I observed a non-African manager speaking to his African accountant. The manager was quite arrogant, and the subordinate responded with submissive affirmations and little eye contact. When the same accountant communicated with his peers and subordinates, both African and non-African, he was full of ideas, and he made plenty of eye contact with those around.

In another example, an adult class of Spanish-speaking farm workers say nothing to their English-speaking instructor over a three-day period—even though they do not understand what is being taught. The same group of farm workers, when given a chance to be active participants in the learning process, become, in the words of a second English-speaking instructor at the same junior college, “the best class of students I have ever taught.”

In yet another case, an Anglo-Saxon adult educator finds that Hispanics are apt to listen politely but not ask questions. He advises others not to expect much participation from Hispanics. Elsewhere, a Hispanic female wonders if the Hispanic farm workers she teaches decline to participate because she is a woman. The first instructor perceives that the lack of participation is inherent in the Hispanic population; the latter assumes that her gender is the cause.

Meanwhile, other Hispanic instructors—male and female—create so much enthusiasm and active participation by Hispanic audiences that those who walk by their conference rooms wonder what is going on. It is not just a cultural difference if someone can totally involve a group in a discussion within minutes, even when that group has had little experience with a more participatory method in the past.

Like ocean currents, also, cultural changes are always on the move. Tangible differences can often be observed from one year to the next.

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

There are important speech pattern variations, including the speed of speech, intonation, clues that indicate it is the other person's turn to speak, degree of enthusiasm, the use of questions to engage others in conversation, the value of silence, and the like. For instance, while one person might ask questions in an effort to keep a conversation going or as a way to show positive regard, another individual may interpret the questioning as an interrogation tactic. Discourse analysis scholars often speak of these types of interpersonal miscommunications as having a cultural or sex-based origin. I would particularly recommend the writings of Deborah Tannen, and those of Daniel N. Maltz and Ruth A. Borker on discourse analysis.⁵

Stella Ting-Toomey speaks much about distinctions among cultures. She suggests that we adopt a sort of *mindful stereotyping* when we approach situations by keeping in mind what we know about a culture. She cautions us to do so tentatively, while remaining receptive to data that may well contradict previously held notions and shatter the stereotype.⁶

Even better, John Winslade and Gerald Monk suggest a stance of *deliberate ignorance* (see chapter on empathic listening). They caution, "Never assume that [you] understand the meaning of an action, an event, or a word."⁷ This is excellent advice for improved interpersonal communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Stereotyping can yield intense feelings of dislike and alienation. Faye Lee, a concerned Japanese American, wrote to me: "How anyone can try to make generalizations about an entire continent of people, plus all the Asian Americans, and the infinite permutations of people's differing experiences, is beyond me."

As we interact with others of a different culture or gender, there are no good substitutes for receptiveness to interpersonal feedback, good observation skills, effective questions, and some old-fashioned horse sense. There is much to be gained by observing how people of the same culture interact with each other. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Most people respond positively to inquiries about their culture. The key is to ask a variety of people, so you can get a balanced view.

Furthermore, it does not hurt to imitate—or at the very least be aware of—the interpersonal communication patterns we observe in others with whom we are communicating.

Making a genuine effort to find the historical, literary, and cultural contributions of a society; learning a few polite expressions in another person's language; and showing appreciation for the food and music of another culture can have especially positive effects.

My contention, then, is not that there are no cultural differences. Variances between cultures and peoples are real and can add richness—and humor—to the fabric of life. My assertion is that people everywhere have much in common, such as their need for affiliation and love, participation, and contribution. When the exterior is peeled off, there are not so many differences after all.

APPENDIX I—REFERENCES

1. Tannen, D. (2006). Preface and “Put down that paper and talk to me!”: Rapport-talk and report-talk. In L. Monaghan & J. E. Goodman (Eds.), *A cultural approach to interpersonal communication: Essential readings* (p. 180). Malden, MA: Blackwell. See other papers by Tannen (2001) in D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. Also see Tannen, D. (1986). *That's not what I meant! How conversational style makes or breaks relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books.
2. Argyle, M. (1988). *Bodily communication* (2nd ed.) (pp. 57–61). London: Methuen.
3. Argyle, M. (1988). *Bodily communication* (2nd ed.) (pp. 57–61). London: Methuen.
4. Brown, R. (1986). *Social psychology: The second edition*. New York: Free Press. Brown also includes an excellent discussion of interpersonal contributions.
5. Maltz, D. N., & Borker, R. A. (2007). A cultural approach to male-female miscommunication. In L. Monaghan & J. E. Goodman (Eds.), *A cultural approach to interpersonal communication: Essential readings* (p. 180). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
6. Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures* (p. 163). New York: Guilford Press.
7. Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2000). *Narrative mediation: A new approach to conflict resolution* (pp. 126–128). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.