

Lecture 1: A theoretical approach to intercultural communication

When does communication become intercultural communication? What distinguishes intercultural communication from communication that is not intercultural? What does it mean to be a competent intercultural communicator? I believe that intercultural communication can be understood via the same basic variables and processes used to describe other forms of communication. All communication occurs between people who have varying degree of familiarity with each other. The key factor of understanding intercultural communication is the concept of the stranger. Different cultures (and subcultures) may have different rules and norms in accordance to which I would point out that understanding the other's culture facilitates cross-cultural communication. Attention is to be focused on the components and characteristics of intercultural communication competence as well as boundaries and common understandings about this central idea are to be established.

Understanding communication

Strangeness and familiarity make up a continuum. As for William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim the term "stranger" is to refer to those people at the most unfamiliar end of continuum.¹ Thus anyone could be considered a stranger, given a sufficiently foreign context. A stranger has limited knowledge of their new environment – of its norms and values. And in turn, the locals have little knowledge of the stranger – of their beliefs, interests and habits. Generally speaking, communication with another involves predicting or anticipating their responses. When communicating with someone familiar we are usually confident in our anticipation, and may not even notice that we are making such predictions. In contrast, when we communicate with strangers we are more aware of the range of their possible responses, and of the uncertainty of our predictions. Communicative predictions are based on data from three levels. First is the cultural level. This level involves information about the other's culture, its dominant values and norms. This level involves information available when communicating with a stranger. Even so, a better understanding of the stranger's culture yields better predictions.