13.4: Defining Intercultural Communication

In defining intercultural communication, there are eight components of communication to work with and yet the writer still must represent holistic meaning. It may be tempting to consider only the (1) source and (2) receiver within a transaction as a representation of intercultural communication, but doing so could mean missing the other six components—(3) message, (4) channel, (5) feedback, (6) context, (7) environment, and (8) interference—in every communicative act. Each component influences and is influenced by culture. Culture is represented in all eight components with every communication. In this context, all communication is intercultural.

It may be tempting to think of intercultural communication as interaction between two people from different countries. While two distinct national passports may be artifacts, or nonverbal representations of communication, what happens when two people from two different parts of the same country communicate? From high and low Germanic dialects, to the perspective of a Southerner versus a Northerner in the United States, to the rural versus urban dynamic, geographic, linguistic, educational, sociological, and psychological traits influence communication. It is not enough to say that someone from rural Southern Chile and the capital, Santiago, bothspeak Castellano (the Chilean word for the Spanish language), so that communication between them must be intracultural communication, or communication within the same culture. What is life like for the rural Southerner? For the city dweller? Were their educational experiences the same? Do they share the same vocabulary? Do they value the same things? To a city dweller, all the sheep look the same. To the rural Southerner, the sheep are distinct, with unique markings; they have value as a food source, a source of wool with which to create sweaters and socks that keep the cold winters at bay, and in their numbers they represent wealth. Even if both Chileans speak the same language, their socialization will influence how they communicate and what they value, and their vocabulary will reflect these differences.

Take this intranational comparison a step further. Within the same family, can there be intercultural communication? If all communication is intercultural, then the answer would be yes. Imagine a three-generation family living in one house. The grandparents may represent another time and different values from the grandchildren. The parents may have a different
level of education and pursue different careers from the grandparents; the schooling the children are receiving may prepare them for yet another career. From music, to food preferences, to how work is done may vary across time; Elvis Presley may seem like ancient history to the children. The communication across generations represents intercultural communication, even if only to a limited degree. But suppose you have a group who are all similar in age and educational level. Do gender and the societal expectations of roles influence interaction? Of course. (Revisit the first Try This from “Deepening Cultural Understanding.”) And so among these students not only do the boys and girls communicate in distinct ways but also not all boys and girls are the same. With a group of sisters, there may be common characteristics, but they will still have differences, and these differences contribute to intercultural communication. We are each shaped by our upbringing and it influences our worldview, what we value, and how we interact with each other. We create culture, and it creates us.

**Try this**

Revisit the revised audience analysis exercise from the previous Try This. For the target assignment and primary reader of a new cultural context, If you were to have to resubmit this document in a different culture with a different context threshold, what would you do in the revision?

Now, take it a step further: If you were a supervisor for this document, and the author / writer were of another culture, how would you make your revision suggestions? How would you communicate those decisions across a different context threshold?

Culture is part of the very fabric of our thought, and we cannot separate ourselves from it, even as we leave home, defining ourselves anew in work and achievements. Every business or organization has a culture, and within what may be considered a global culture, there are many subcultures or co-cultures. For example, consider the difference between the sales and accounting departments in a corporation. We can quickly see two distinct groups with their own symbols, vocabulary, and values. Within each group, there may also be smaller groups, and each member of each department comes from a distinct background that in itself influences behavior and interaction. Now, change that context of a piece of communication leaving your computer. Who will read it? Who could read it? What will your colleagues or readers of another culture take from it—intended or not?

Sometimes, the focus of technical communication is quite easy; the primary reader is clearly targeted through demographic research. But, think about how much more effective, more dynamic, a communication could be if the writer considered the potential cultural perspectives at work when the document is read.

**CHAPTER ATTRIBUTION INFORMATION**

This chapter was written by Billy Merck, Portland Community College, and is licensed [CC-BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).