Intercultural communication.  
A general introduction

NATO Regional Cooperation Course (NRCC)

NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION

NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE

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Topics and objectives
This lecture deals with the following 6 topics:

1. Presentation of the notion of “culture” and concrete examples.
2. Discussion of the notion of “cultural identity” is.
3. The scope of intercultural (or “cross-cultural”) communication.
4. Typical and recurrent obstacles that impede a successful intercultural communication.
5. (Negative or positive) impact of cultural (mis)communication.
6. Possibilities to improve intercultural communication.
The central objective of this lecture is to make you aware of:

1. the extreme complexity of what is called “cultural diversity”

2. the central importance of an appropriate understanding and “use” of group or community specific visions and values for the development of stable, sustainable and peaceful relationships between communities possessing different ethnic, linguistic, religious, ideological, … origins.
The notion of « culture »
A general definition of culture:

Culture is a **complex cognitive system** mainly composed of:

- (dogmatic, basic, “revealed”) **believes**,
- (critical) **knowledge** and (technical) **know-how**,
- (normative) **rules** (laws, …) and **values**

A culture, in this sense, constitutes or forms **identities**:

- the (personal) **identity** of an individual;
- the (collective) **identity** of a social actor:
  - of (religious, ethnic, linguistic) “**communities**”,
  - of (national, international, political, economic, military, …) **institutions, groups, classes, …**.
Practically, we are “immersed” in a huge diversity of different types or genres of culture:

- **Intellectual cultures** (spiritual, religious, “humanistic”, artistic, …) => general and basic values …

- **Social cultures** (social groups, social hierarchy, social practices, …) => organisation of a social structure,

- **Political cultures** (governance, law and order, coercion, …) => maintenance of a social structure

- **Daily life cultures** (housing, eating/drinking, wearing clothes, interacting/communicating, …) =>

- **Technical and scientific cultures** (producing, …) => means, tools, know-how of a social structure.

Note: all these different types or genres of culture are interwoven, interrelated
The notion of « culture »

- 4 main features characterising culture as a whole:

1. A culture “frames” the world view of a community, a group (cf. A. Schütz, M. Foucault).

2. A culture is a collective cognitive (intellectual) resource of a group or community for dealing with living in its world and for satisfying its needs (cf. C. Lévi-Strauss).

3. A culture is also a symbolic capital – a power – distributed in a highly unbalanced way over populations having to share the same physical space, the same resources, etc (cf. P. Bourdieu).

4. Culture is, finally a historical entity – it changes through time due especially to internal differentiation, cross-cultural contacts (“métissage”) and learning (N. Elias).
The notion of « cultural identity »
The cultural identity of a person or a community is multi-faceted and mainly based on a set of shared common references:

- a common language and communication and interaction patterns (“etiquette”, gesture, mimicry, “language style”, “argumentation”, …),
- a common vision of the social structure and doing (family, institutions, groups, clubs, …),
- a common conception of the social space (intimate space, private space, public, …),
- a common conception of the social rhythm (life timing: daily life, calendar, …),
The notion of « cultural identity »

- The cultural identity (continued):
  - a common conception of the social relevancy and added value of (natural) objects, artefacts, instruments, services, consumables, etc.,
  - the sharing of common decision and policy making systems,
  - common religious and other intellectual references,
  - especially: common traditions, customs, a (supposed) common history, (supposed) common origins, etc.
  - especially: common “collective symbolism”:
    - historical personalities (kings, warriors, thinkers, ⋯),
    - anthropomorphic entities (gods, imaginary figures, ⋯),
    - (historical or mythical) events,
    - emblems,
    - “big texts”
    - etc.
In this sense, the cultural identity (or specificity) of a person or a group can be "read" and interpreted through:

- a whole set of signs by which the members of a given society recognize one another, while distinguishing them from people not belonging to that society" (UNESCO)

Main sign systems:

- Natural signs": human body + movement (kinaesthesia), physical environment, …

- Human made signs ("artefacts"):
  - Language and texts: phraseology, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, …
  - Visual (figurative and symbolic) representations and "œuvres"
  - Tools, instruments, "consumables", …: clothing, eating, housing, …

Culture = a sort of (living) "text" that someone with the necessary competence can read and understand.
However: No community, no person is a “culturally monolithic” entity

A community is always confronted to potential internal tensions between:

- the “orthodox” and the “heterodox”,
- the “dominant” class and the “dominated” class
- the “elder” and the “younger” generation,
- etc.

Furthermore: a person –

- always belongs to more than one culture
- among which there can exist – “psychological” – tensions (example: tension between “national” and “religious” sentiments, military obligations and religious convictions, …).
What is intercultural/cross-cultural communication?
Intercultural (or “cross-cultural”) communication, broadly speaking is:

- the (direct or mediated) interaction between people belonging to different cultures, possessing different references, beliefs, values, traditions, histories, languages, …
  - in order to achieve (commonly accepted) objectives or goals
  - and in being aware of the cultural diversity of the participants as an intrinsically added value which should be respected and “cultivated”.

Distinction of “intercultural communication” as a phenomenon and as a kind of “social philosophy”.

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Typical intercultural or cross-cultural projects and programs:

- Implementation of (economic, social, medical, …) programs in developing countries,
- Community education and cross-community consensus building in multicultural (urban) environments;
- (Political, economic, military, …) consensus building between different, national and international actors;
- Building and management of global (economic, social, …) projects requiring the participation of people belonging to different traditions,
- Humanitarian interventions (peace keeping, natural catastrophes, …) requiring a knowledge of the “beneficiary” culture and its active participation.
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication:

1 – Social communication:

Typical objectives:

- To convince people from communities with different (ethnic, religious, linguistic, ...) backgrounds to adopt and/or to respect common, socially accepted rules (laws) and values in their daily life;

- To enable people from communities with different (ethnic, religious, linguistic, ...) backgrounds to overcome blocked situations of “mutual exclusion and ignorance”.

Typical examples:

- Reduction of the danger of (inter-communitarian) acts of violence, riots, etc. in peri-urban context

- Building of cultural awareness through artistic animations, intercultural events, ...
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

2. (Sustainable) development communication:

- Typical objective:
  - enable (vulnerable, threatened, ...) communities to initiate their own, autonomous development aiming at a better quality of life.

- Typical example:
  - Programs aiming at the reduction of poverty through the implementation of community appropriate businesses and credit circles
  - Creation of community specific education centres
  - Creation of community specific information and education media
  - ...

The scope of intercultural communication
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

3 – Cultural and linguistic mediation:

- Typical objectives:

  - Contribute to the (linguistic and social) **adaptation and integration** of “foreigners” (immigrants, refugees, ...) in a “host” country

- Typical example:

  - linguistic and social education (“alphabetisation”) programs and structures (associations, ...),

  - community interpretation projects (i.e. projects aiming to accompany and to council “foreigners” in their daily life and professional problems)
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

4 - International communication:

- Typical objective:
  - negotiate and establish cross-cultural consensus between people acting globally but belonging to different cultures and traditions

- Typical example:
  - creation of common (global, regional, ⋯) political, economic, social, ⋯ spaces;
  - Creation of transnational (public, private) institutions;
  - Creation of international programs and projects of economic, political or social interest.
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

5 - Community driven (general or specialised) information media communication:

- Objective:
  - create and/or maintain *common collective* (community binding) references,
  - make people believe that they belong to one community (even if this community is a “diasporic"

- Typical example:
  - mass media for diasporic (ethnic, religious, political, … communities
  - Traditional and/or “alternative” media for specific social communities
6 main sectors/domains of intercultural communication (continued):

6 – Intercultural marketing and management:

Objective

✓ Use the cultural specificity of the people of a “target” community for achieving successfully mainly commercial objectives.

Typical example:

✓ the “globalisation” of a (regional) food such as the originally (Italian) pizza, the (US) hamburger, etc.;

✓ The opening of different non-European markets for a French luxury product, …;

✓ The optimal use of “human capital” with respect to a given norm or mission (i.e. management of multicultural teams, troops, …).
Where intercultural communication can lead to misunderstandings
There are a series of typical “obstacles” impeding an efficient (successful) intercultural or cross-cultural communication:

1 – Obstacle with regard to a “foreign” language deficit:

✓ Lack of an appropriate linguistic competence to understand and to speak correctly the other’s mother tongue;

✓ Use of a simplified “communication language” (in general: a kind of English = “global English”).

2 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit of understanding of community specific direct communication or interaction patterns (routines):

✓ Lack of an appropriate competence (experience) of interacting verbally, visually, bodily, … with the culturally other in routine (daily life, professional, …) situations and, more especially, in private situations.
Series of typical intercultural communication “obstacles” (continued):

3 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit in “social face management” specific to a given target community

✓ Lack of understanding of “etiquettes” and values governing the interactions between people in a given community: rules of courtesy and politeness, of respect, of honour, etc.

4 – Obstacle with regard to a deficit of understanding the social space organising the daily (professional, private, …) life of a target community

✓ Lack of understanding the structure of this space and the rules the behaviour, for instance, in sacred places, in open places, in private places, etc.
5 – Obstacle with respect to the (partial) absence of an appropriate knowledge of the community specific social institutions, social networks and practices

- Lack of an appropriate social and intellectual alphabetisation (example: of community stakeholders, community specific decision and policy making procedures, etc.).

6 – Obstacle of cultural ethnocentrism

- Interpretation of the culture of a given (“target”) community through the lenses of one’s own culture (believes, knowledge and values);

- Typical example: how to behave with respect to social practices that are not acceptable with respect to our own vision? How to handle the reference to “universal rights”, “basic rights”, etc.
Series of typical intercultural communication “obstacles” (continued):

7 – Two specific cases of ethnocentrism:

- The **“common sense mistake”** (“common sense” is culturally dependent)

- The **“best intention mistake”** (“best intentions” are culturally determined)
Impact of cultural (mis)communication
The negative impact of the quoted obstacles can largely vary, depending on different “situational” parameters such as:

- mutual knowledge between the concerned groups/communities,
- previous experiences in cross-cultural interactions,
- communicational intentionality (was there an intentional plan to hurt, to violate a cultural value?),
- repetitiveness of a (cross-cultural) mistake,
- gravity of a (cross-cultural) mistake,
- “global atmosphere” between the participants of an interaction.
However, a specific, very serious and unfortunately frequent consequence of cross-cultural (mis)communication is the so-called:

- “intractable (long term) conflict situation”

Reference: the very valuable “Beyond Intractability Project” of Guy and Heidi Burgess; University of Colorado at Boulder)

An intractable conflict situation is mainly rooted in general “identity problems” due to (cf. above quoted project):

- 1/ deep cultural (moral, religious, ideological, political, ...) value differences;

- 2/ high-stakes distributional issues.
Examples of intractable conflict situations:

- Identity clash between communities living in one region (Kashmir, Bosnia, Rwanda, …)
- The “split history” syndrome (example: the oppressor/victim tradition in the history of Argentina, Chile, France/Algeria, or again Rwanda, …)
- The social revolt theme (like in today’s Greece, in rural and peri-urban regions of South-America and South Africa, …)
- Enemy stereotyping including the tentative to “dehumanise the other” (cf. Z. Bauman) – a typical process in war times.
Principal benefit of successful intercultural or cross-cultural interactions (following UNESCO, FAO, World Bank, …):

- Perspective to create trustful and sustainable relationships between culturally diverse communities (or stakeholders of culturally diverse communities)

- as a basis for any future interaction avoiding irreversible, intractable conflict situations.
How to improve intercultural communication?
The main challenge in intercultural or “cross-cultural” communication is that of

- “cultural awareness” (as well as “cultural self awareness”)
- i.e. the fact to become aware of the cultural (ethnic, linguistic, religious, …) specificity of the people with whom we have to interact.

The challenge of “cultural awareness”:

1/ as a knowledge to be cultivated and learned;

2/ as a “social technology” already integrated in cross-cultural programs and actions;

3/ as a “personal aid” in concrete situations.
1 – “Cultural awareness” as a knowledge resource to be cultivated:

- through very official *academical curricula*,

- thanks to highly valuable *practical online courses* (cf. bibliography),

- through systematic scientific field work, i.e. expertises in *cultural analysis* of communities or social groups.
2 – Cultural awareness as a “social technology”:

- Cultural awareness is already “implemented” in a big variety of intercultural programs in form, for instance:
  1. of community stakeholders negotiations (cf. World Bank, ⋅⋅⋅)
  2. or of so-called participatory programs (cf. FAO, UNESCO, ⋅⋅⋅) – of:
     - “collaborative program (action) design”,
     - “grassroots process design” (“community mobilization programs”),
     - public participation programs (vs mere “elite negotiation”),
     - etc.
3 – Cultural awareness as a “personal aid” in concrete situations: set of practical “rules of thumb” should be observed in a intercultural/ cross-cultural interaction:

- engaged in a concrete interaction/communication, **assume always** that there are **differences** until similarity is proven;

- mistrust “general cultural patterns” (“stereotypes”) for assessing the other with whom you are interacting,

- mistrust your own assumptions, verities and evidences – they all belong to your culture;

- mistrust also your “natural” tendencies (empathies, emotions, “best intentions”, etc.),
Some e-resources
E-resources

- Tracy Bowens: [Cross-cultural training](#).

- Hans Gullestrup, [Cultural analysis – towards cross-cultural understanding](#). Aalborg University Press 2006

- Pekka Seppälä and Arja Vainio-Mattila: [Navigating culture. A Roadmap to culture and development](#). Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for International Development Cooperation Helsinki, Finland (2000)

- “[Beyond Intractability Project](#)” of Guy and Heidi Burgess; University of Colorado at Boulder

- [Sémiotique des cultures, communication interculturelle, nouveaux médias](#). Online pedagogical material (in French and English) available on the web portal of the research lab ESCoM in Paris.