

Communication Patterns and Assumptions of Differing Cultural Groups in the United States

Comparisons of cultural value systems are not meant to stereotype individuals or cultures; rather, they are meant to provide generalizations, observations about a group of people, from which we can discuss cultural difference and likely areas of miscommunication.

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African American Communication Patterns

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999), African Americans comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population.

Animation/emotion: Communication seen as authentic is generally passionate and animated. Communication that is presented in a neutral or objective way is seen as less credible, and the motives of the speaker may be questioned. The assumption is that if you believe something, you will advocate for it. Truth is established through argument and debate. "Conversational style is provocative and challenging, and the intensity is focused on the validity of the ideas being discussed" (Kochman 1981 pp. 30-31).

Effective teachers of African American students are often found "...displaying emotion to garner student respect" (Delpit, 1995, p. 142). African Americans tend to perceive greater emotional intensity when rating the expressions of others (Matsumoto, 1993).

Directness/indirectness: Generally directly facing and talking with the person with whom you have an issue or problem is preferred. Someone who won't face you directly shows his or her claim or problem to be invalid; the assumption is that anyone with a legitimate problem would come to the other person directly. A lack of response to a general accusation or allegation by someone is viewed as an indication of innocence. The internal attitude of an innocent person is "I know they aren't talking about me, so I don't have to respond." (Kochman 1981 p.90). Responding to a general accusation shows that the "mark hit home." A direct accusation will usually bring a direct denial and a request to confront the person making the allegation.

In terms of romance, men and often women will usually state directly whether they are interested in a potential relationship. Ignoring or acting subtly disinterested is not interpreted as a sign of disinterest from a woman; it may be seen as a rude or arrogant response (Kochman 1981).

Teachers are often expected to show they care by "...controlling the class; exhibiting personal power; establishing meaningful personal relationships;.... pushing students to

achieve the (class) standard; and holding the attention of the students by incorporating African-American interactional styles in their teaching" (Delpit, 1995, p. 142).

Eye contact: Tends to be quite direct and prolonged when speaking, less so when listening. This is the opposite of the dominant-culture pattern in which the speaker tends to look away from the listener and the listener looks directly at the speaker. The overall **amount** of eye contact is not different from dominant-culture patterns; it is **when** the eye contact occurs that differs (Johnson, 1971, p. 17).

Gestures: Frequent and sometimes large gestures are normative. The expressiveness of the communication is what is valued, and if the gestures increase expressiveness they are seen as enhancing communication. (V. Valdez, September 1998, personal communication).

Identity orientation: Traditionally, African Americans have a more collateral orientation than European Americans (Nichols 1986, management training session). Self is viewed and decisions are made within the context of the group and by assessing how the action will affect others in the collateral identity group.

Turn taking and pause time: Turns are taken when the speaker is moved to speak; urgency, status, and the ability to command attention from others determines speaking order. The right to continue speaking is granted by others depending on how well the speaker's idea is being accepted (Kochman 1981 pp. 34). Responses from others are usually made at the end of **each** of the speaker's points, and this is not felt to be an interruption of the speaker (Kochman 1981 pp.26-27). Turn taking in dyads is also regulated by non-verbal cues that differ markedly from those of the dominant culture. These include: hand gestures, postural shifts which mirror the conversational partner, intonation drop, tempo slowing, and lessening of intensity. The change in gaze direction employed in the dominant culture is often not used (LaFrance & Mayo, 1975, pp. 7-8).

Pause time is often brief; people in groups may interrupt or speak on the ends of other's sentences.

Space: Research on use of space among African Americans is mixed. Some studies indicate that, in race-matched pairs, black children will stand closer to each other during conversation than white children do. Other research has shown that African American adults employ a greater public distance from each other (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978, pp. 79-80).

Time: Linear time is not internalized to the extent it is in the dominant society. Being a more relationship-oriented culture, African Americans tend to be more relaxed in this regard--"The right time is when we get there." Anger from others at being late is often met with puzzlement—"I'm here now, let's get started" is a common response to this kind of situation (Nichols 1986).

Touch: Among friends, African Americans employ more physical touch than European Americans do (LaFrance & Mayo, 1978, pp. 80-81) and less than that usually seen among people of Latin or Arab cultures. African Americans tend to touch children more often and for greater lengths of time than do European-Americans (Coles, 1971).

Vocal patterns: Black English contains a wide range of both volume and pitch within its acceptable pattern. The voice can range from a very quiet, deep sound to very loud and

high-pitched, and all may be considered appropriate. Expressiveness and compatibility with the speaking situation is what determines whether the pitch and tone are "correct" (Olquin, 1995). There is not a fixed, relatively narrow range, as is the case in some other cultures.

Native American Communication Patterns

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999), 2.2 million persons were classified as American Indians or Alaska Natives in 1994. (Approximately 1.5% of the U.S. population).

Animation/emotion: The preferred communication style is restrained, "...in order to not impose one's energy or emotion on others" (Elliott, 1992). Often Indians will speak dispassionately about something very meaningful and important to them.

Directness/indirectness: Indirectness is usually preferable (Locust, 1988). This gives others the chance to refuse a request without directly saying no, or to evade a question that is felt to be too personal or simply a subject the listener does not want to discuss (Darnell, 1988, p. 5). Elders with high status may sometimes be very direct with those younger than themselves. An untrue allegation or accusation will often simply result in no response from an Indian person; to reply is seen as lowering oneself to the level of ignorance or over-emotionality of the other person. It also involves entering the negative energy space of the accuser (Locust, 1988, p. 122) and may be interpreted by other Indians as a sign of guilt, an indicator that the accusation is true. Silence on the part of Indian people is often interpreted by Anglos as indirectness, although the actual meaning may be quite different (Basso, 1970, p. 218).

Eye contact: Direct prolonged eye contact is seen as invasive. Its avoidance is practiced to "protect the personal autonomy of the interactors" (Darnell, 1988, p. 6). Eye contact is usually fleeting, and the gaze of listener and speaker will often remain around the forehead, mouth, ear or throat area. Direct gaze to an elder or very respected person is seen as especially rude, unless one is in a formal listening/storytelling situation, in which case "...listeners may look at (the speaker) more directly ... without violating his or her personal space by eye contact" (Darnell, 1988, p. 15).

Gestures: A relatively restrained use of gestures in normal conversation is typical. Storytellers or elders may often use gestures, which are larger and more frequent than those found in usual conversations.

Identity orientation: Traditional American Indians have a lineal orientation—their identity is spread vertically over time. Ancestors, the present collateral group or tribe, and the potential people who are not yet born are all part of a person's felt identity and will be considered when making important decisions (Samovar, Porter, and Jain, 1981).

Turn taking and pause time: In formal group speaking situations, turns are usually taken by everyone present, and no one else speaks until the previous speaker is completely through and a few moments of silence have ensued (Darnell, 1988, p. 5). Speaking too quickly after the previous speaker may be seen to indicate that the next speaker, talking so quickly after the first, is a rash person who does not think things through before he or she speaks, or is showing disrespect for the importance of the

other person or of what they had to say. Interrupting another speaker is unbearable rudeness, and may lead to severe social consequences if the person interrupted is an elder. When interacting with members of other cultures in which appropriate pause times are shorter, Indians may have to be rude (by their own standards) in order to participate in the conversation at all (Basso, 1988, p. 12). This is a stressful experience for the person, who feels forced to violate their own standards and self-concept in order to be heard.

Space: Often a side-by-side arrangement is more comfortable than a face-to-face orientation, especially in two-person conversations. If interacting with non-Indians or people whom they do not know well, Native Americans often prefer a slightly larger interaction distance--more than arm's length--for conversation.

Psychological space can be maintained by silence. This may be employed if the listener is asked a question he or she feels is invasive or regards as something that should not be addressed with the other person, because the other does not have the standing of an intimate friend or relative. Sometimes the subject is simply seen as inappropriate.

Time: For Native people raised in a traditional environment, "clock" time is not internalized to the same degree as it is in the dominant culture. The "right time" for something is when everything and everyone comes together; then the appropriate activity will ensue. Time is felt to be more a matter of season, general time of day, or when the person is internally ready for a particular activity. "Every living thing has its own inherent (time) system and you must deal with each plant or animal in terms of its own time" (Hall, 1976, p. 71). The imposition of "clock time" by members of other cultures may be interpreted as arrogant, uncaring, or oppressive behavior. Related to this is the tendency of Indian parents not to worry if their child is "not developing on time" according to others' cultural or psychological standards.

Touch: Touch is usually reserved for friends or intimates; however, many Indians have adopted the European American custom of handshaking, at least outside of traditional settings. The Indian handshake is very light and fleeting, to avoid imposing energy on the other person or receiving energy one does not want.

Vocal patterns: A relatively narrow, quiet range of pitch, tone, and volume is viewed as the proper adult communication pattern, especially when non-Indians or elders are present. Talking quickly, loudly, and very animatedly may be viewed with some disapproval

Anglo or European American Communication Patterns

European Americans (ER's) comprise around % of the U.S. population.

Animation/Emotion: Emotionally expressive communication is not a preferred mode in public communication situations. In fact, European Americans worry that intensely emotional interactions may lead to a loss of self-control, and therefore should be avoided. (Kochman, 1981). What people know is not necessarily expressed in behavior. There is a strong preference to preserve the appearance of cordiality and friendliness, even when strong differences of opinion are present. European Americans prefer to speak about beliefs, opinions, intentions and commitments. The prescribed value of

"equality" in U.S. culture commonly leads to a presumption of **sameness**: people assume that if they feel or think a certain way about a situation, others would feel or think much as they do, if placed in the same or a similar situation (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981).

Directness/indirectness: European Americans tend to speak very directly about certain things. Their general form of communication tends to rely heavily on logic and technical information rather than allusion, metaphor, or other more creative or emotional styles of persuasion. "Good" communication is believed to be linear: the speaker should move through their "points" in a straight, logical line, with an explicitly stated conclusion (Kaplan, 1967; Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p.156).

Eye Contact: The European American convention for eye contact is for the speaker to make intermittent brief contact with the listener, and for the listener to gaze fairly steadily at the speaker. Children are specifically taught to look at the speaker (Kochman, 1981), and will be reprimanded if they do not. Direct eye contact is believed to be a sign of honesty and sincerity (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. 99; Johnson, 1971, p. 17; Althen, 1988, pp.143-144).

Gestures: European Americans tend to use a "medium" range of gestures in usual conversation—not so large or frequent as Arabs or Southern Italians but not as restrained as the English or Japanese (Althen, 1988, pp.141- 142).

Identity orientation: European Americans have an individualism orientation. They view the "self" as located within the individual person, who is seen as having a separate but equal place among other individuals. Self is viewed, and mature identity is believed to be formed, primarily as an autonomous individual. Children are raised to become self-sufficient; ideally, neither they nor their parents expect them to live with older generations of the family after about the age of twenty. A young person who lives with parents after this age may be regarded questionably by themselves and others (Condon, 19; Althen, 1988, p. 5).

Turn taking and pause time: Ideally, turn taking is signaled by the speaker looking directly at the listener and ceasing to speak. Pause time is very brief; often people speak on the end of the first speaker's last sentence (Kochman, 1981).

Space: The usual distance for social conversation is 2-3 feet--about arm's length. Standing closer than this will usually be perceived as intimacy or invasiveness, depending on the relationship of those involved.

Time: In European American culture, time is thought of as linear and monochronic — that is, one thing or one person at a time should be given full attention. Time is conceptualized as having a past, present, and future, and is often thought of as a real object "which should be saved and not wasted" (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981, pp. 113-114). It is not seen as a human-made abstraction. People often speak of losing, wasting, or finding time. Many European Americans feel pressured by the passage of time, and consequently tend to behave in an "efficient" and task-oriented way. If a person has an appointment with you at 3:00, most European Americans would begin to be affronted if the person is not there by a few minutes after 3:00, and would want an explanation of why they are not. This behavior can be interpreted by members of other

cultures as coldness—U.S. Americans may be seen as having little interest in personal relationships and trust building, valuing only efficiency (Condon, 1997).

Touch: Most European Americans tend to "employ very little touching in public" (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, p. 175) that is, beyond the expected greeting ritual of the handshake. Lack of touching may be related to cultural values of objectivity, efficiency, and autonomy. European Americans have been described by members of other cultures as touch-avoidant. Compared to the amount of touch that occurs in Latin American, Southern European and Arab cultures, this is certainly true.

Vocal patterns: Tend to be in a mid-range of pitch and on the low end of vocal variation. "Adult," mature communication in public is believed to be objective, rational, and relatively non-emotional. Someone who is expressing himself or herself in a very passionate way may be suspected of irrationality (Kochman, 1981).

Thought patterns and Rhetorical style: Directness in stating the point, purpose, or conclusion of a communication is the preferred style (Kaplan, 1967). Kaplan describes the English language style graphically as an arrow: This style of communication may be viewed by other cultural groups, with quite different styles, as abrupt or inappropriate. It is in strong contrast to the Asian style, portrayed by Kaplan as a spiral. It is also quite different from the Romance style (including Hispanic), which is portrayed as an arrow with sharp turns in the shaft.

Asian American Communication Patterns

"Asian" is a very broad term, encompassing people from southern India to Indonesia to northern Mongolia. The statements below apply most clearly to people from northern Asian countries such as Japan or China, although they may apply in varying degree to Asian people (or their descendants) from other nations. "Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are persons of Asian or Pacific Islander ancestry" and represent "more than 50 ethnic groups and speak more than 800 languages or dialects. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population, nearly tripling in size from 3.5 million in 1980 to almost 9.6 million in 1998." (CDC, 1999). People designated as "Asian" comprise approximately % of the U.S. population.

Animation/emotion: The control of emotional display is highly valued. An overt display of strong emotion could result in a loss of face for both the speaker and the listener.

Eye contact: Japan and China are overtly hierarchical societies in which it is always important to know one's status relative to the person one is speaking with, so the proper forms of language and nonverbal communication can be used. Direct eye contact lasting longer than a second or two is avoided, especially with those superior to oneself in the hierarchy or with elders. To behave otherwise would be disrespectful.

Gestures: Gestures are usually kept close to the body and are quite restrained. They are used less frequently than is normal among English or Spanish speakers.

Identity orientation: Japan is usually characterized as a group-oriented collateral society, similar to Latin American or Arab cultures. This means a person's identity and status are intimately tied to the identity and status of their family, and this persists throughout the individual's life span. Decisions are often made in relation to obligations

to family, and secondarily to one's own desires. In Japan this sense of "family obligation" and a tie to the sense of personal identity may be extended to the company one works for. China is seen as a lineal culture, also group oriented, but with a greater sense of personal identity being tied to ancestors and to forthcoming generations than is experienced by most modern Japanese-Americans.

Pacing and pause time: Normally the pause employed is somewhat longer than that of European Americans, and a little shorter than the pause typical of Native Americans.

Time: Traditionally, time is seen as cyclical and ever-returning. Asian cultures are masters of waiting till "the time is right." They excel in long-term planning and the initiation and maintenance of long-term relationships.

Touch: In public settings, touch is often so rare as to be virtually non-existent. In one study which measured from, to whom, and where on the body touch was allowed, "Japanese college students received less touch from mothers and other family members than U.S. Americans received from casual acquaintances" (Barnlund 1975 p. 154).

Vocal patterns: A relatively quiet and low-key vocal pattern is the ideal. The overt expression of emotion is considered unseemly and childish (Tada 1975). Northern Asians, especially Japanese, tend to express emotion by "intuitive, nonverbal communication of the sort that develops among family members living under one roof" (Kunihiro 1976, p. 53). Indirect allusion and metaphor are often used to express deep emotion. "The value of suppression and restraint has deep historical roots for the Japanese." (Ramsey 1985, p. 310).

Thought patterns and Rhetorical style: Directness in stating the point, purpose, or conclusion of a communication is not considered appropriate (Kaplan, R. 1967). Kaplan describes the Asian style graphically as a spiral. This style of communication may be viewed by other cultural groups as evasive or obscure. It is in strong contrast to the European American style, portrayed by Kaplan as a straight arrow.

Hispanic American Communication Patterns

"There are approximately 30 million Americans living in the United States who are of Latin American or other Spanish descent, comprising 11.1% of the total population." (CDC, 1999). As of 1994, "64 percent were Mexican Americans, 11 percent were Puerto Ricans, 13 percent were from Central and South America or the Caribbean, 5 percent were Cuban Americans, and 7 percent were classified as 'Other' Hispanics." (Department of Health and Human Services/Public Health Service, 1997)

Terms used to refer to this group of people can be controversial (Andrews, 1999). Some use the expression "Spanish people" to denote all people who speak Spanish, but the expression should not apply to anyone other than individuals who are natives of Spain. Many use the term "Hispanics," to denote all who speak Spanish, but, again, this term does not literally apply to any people who do not claim a lineage or cultural heritage related to Spain.

"Latino" is used to refer to people with a lineage or cultural heritage related to Latin America, but should not be used to refer to the millions of Native Americans in the region. Many use the term "Mexican" to refer to persons with a lineage or cultural heritage related to Mexico, but it should only be used to refer to the nationality of inhabitants of Mexico. U.S. citizens from Mexico often object to being referred to as "Mexicans", as do members of indigenous groups in Mexico.

"Mexican-American" is another term sometimes used to refer to U.S. citizens with a lineage or cultural heritage related to Mexico, but, again, many object to this use. The argument against "Mexican-American" is that other nationalities, such as Germans, are not referred to as "German-Americans."

The term "Chicano" has been used recently as a distinct way to refer to U.S. citizens of Mexican heritage, but it was originally used as a derogatory term and is sometimes considered unsavory among more "assimilated" Mexican-Americans. It often has a connotation of political awareness and activism.

Another group of persons from Mexico do not refer to themselves as "Americans" at all. They consider themselves to be in an occupied country because only 150 years ago large numbers of Mexicans became "American" citizens overnight, when the United States won 50 percent of what was Mexico as the spoils of war in the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. In fact, the treaty specifically recognized the rights of such people to retain the property deeded to them by Mexican or Spanish colonial authorities and to receive education in Spanish. (The treaty has obviously not been honored.)

A group that also does not refer to themselves as "Mexican-Americans" are those who are in the United States because of economic conditions and plan to return permanently to Mexico as soon as it is economically feasible. Although they may have U.S. citizenship, their ties are primarily with family and friends in Mexico.

In short, if persons have cultural roots in Mexico, more should be learned before referring to them with any single term. If persons have a cultural heritage from Latin America, "Latino" is an appropriate term. Otherwise, "Hispanic" is the most widely used nomenclature at this time.

Animation/Emotion: In public ethnically mixed settings or with unfamiliar persons, Latinos or Hispanics tend to be somewhat low-key. They may often state their points quite directly, but in a relatively quiet and respectful manner. In settings with only Hispanics present, a high level of emotional expression is acceptable. (Olquin, 1995).

Eye Contact: Direct eye contact is often viewed as disrespectful. When a person from a Latin culture is being spoken to, they may look away or down as a sign of respect to the person speaking, especially if that person is significantly older than the listener or is in a position of authority over them (LaFrance & Mayo, 1976).

Gestures: People from Latin cultures tend to use a medium to high level of gestures. This is consonant with a cultural pattern that considers a higher level of emotionality in expression to be the norm (Kaplan, 1967; Albert & Nelson, 1993).

Identity orientation: Latino cultures in general have a collateral orientation. This means the person's identity is intimately tied to the identity and status of their family

throughout the individual's life span. Decisions are often made in relation to obligations to family, and secondarily to one's own desires (Condon & Yousef, 1975).

Pacing & pause time: If the person's first language is Spanish, pause time tends to be relatively short. Among indigenous groups, the pause time will be considerably longer, perhaps approaching that of Native people from what is now the continental United States (Bennett, 1996).

Space: Latino's interpersonal distance tends to be somewhat less than that of European Americans (ER's). The typical 2-3 foot "arm's length" spacing preferred by European Americans is experienced by many Hispanics as cold, unfriendly, or a way for the ER to show superiority. Since both people's expectations for "normal" social distances are often unconscious, one can witness the phenomena of the ER being backed across the room by a Hispanic person, as each tries to conduct the conversation in a way that feels right for them. This may be amusing to witness but is very uncomfortable for both participants (Bennett, 1996).

Time: Latinos tend to operate in a polychronic fashion—that is, many activities may be going on at once, and priority is given to the immediate needs of people, especially those involved in one's collateral network. Time is a fluid and malleable concept (Condon, 1997).

Touch: Latin cultures tend to use touch more than cultures originating in Northern Europe, the U.S., or Canada. Levels of touch between members of the same sex occur far more often in public settings in predominately Hispanic cultures than they do in European American culture, and do not carry the sexual connotation such behavior often has in the U.S (Condon, 1997).

Vocal patterns: The normal range of voice pitch for Spanish speakers is narrower than it is for native English speakers; often pitch and volume that are part of "normal" conversation in English are only present in Spanish in the "angry" range of conversation. Consequently the Spanish speaker may experience the European American as arrogant or intimidating. The English speaker may experience the Hispanic as shy, lacking self-confidence, or think the Spanish-speaker is mumbling when they are only speaking in the range that is "normal" for them (Olquin, 1995).

Volume: In business conversation, a quiet and somewhat formal way of speaking is appropriate for the Spanish speaker. The Hispanic can experience the European American as "yelling at me" or showing irritation when the English speaker operates at their normal volume (Olquin, 1995).

Thought patterns and Rhetorical style: Directness in stating the point, purpose, or conclusion of a communication is not the preferred style (Kaplan, 1967). Kaplan describes the pattern of a Romance language as an arrow that makes sharp turns before getting to its destination. The journey is part of the valued experience. This style of communication may be viewed by European Americans as disorganized or intellectually weak, since it violates the direct linear cause-and-effect norms of English speakers.