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WHEN COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE CROSS PATHS

Hall, B., Covarrubias, P. & Kirschbaum, K. (2022) *Among Cultures – the Challenge of Communication*. New York, Routledge.

The topic of intercultural communication has gained much interest over the previous decades, and it seems the interest it attracts is still growing – this is why changes in the book editions do not come as a surprise;

This last one that came to the shelves right after the pandemic era includes changes imposed by the immense global changes and takes into consideration an ocean of concerns, topics, i.e. heated issues. This one contains some major parts, i.e. chapters, as well as, for the first time, some mini chapters – which are narrower, maybe not applicable to all users, vocational in a way (e.g. addressing family, health, tourism, globalisation – where the characteristics generally applicable to intercultural communication might take on some of their own, sui generis, attributes), and a selection to cherry pick from – unlike the ‘main chapters’ that are equally useful for all those who enjoy this text.

Other changes the title *Among Cultures* experienced are the result of changing needs, trends and suitability – some parts have merged in the meantime, changed their flow and/or core components to meet the needs surrounding us. In this regard, although the text has always taken pride in illustrative examples, it now brims with those of more recent character, so that the readers can relate in an easier way.

Anyhow, the spirit – the soul of the book and its main intention has remained unchanged; it is there to give us a helping hand when meeting, understanding, and interacting with different cultures, and becoming communicators, citizens or teachers of the world. It is written in such an accessible and descriptive way that it

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is equally useful for independent usage by those who travel, work internationally, those who communicate with different cultures for some other purposes, those who have moved abroad, teachers dealing with the phenomena of culture and communication within the framework of their courses and many more.

Apart from the fact that it is well-versed and suitable for different categories and the fact that the topic/-s covered are of ubiquitous character, what also contributes to its adaptability and wide usage is the structure; apart from illustrations, stories, theoretical support, it is filled with descriptions, activities, discussion questions, review and assessment sections – all of which help us navigate either alone or as a part of a group/class/team and go back to any of the sections (even separately) whenever we want – recycling the material over and over again.

This 380 page version contains 17 versatile chapters – characterised by a uniform structure. Upon tackling the questions of interest to each of them, via a balance of theoretical background and vivid, comprehensive examples and stories, the chapters contain sections dedicated to summaries, reflection questions, as well activities and notes.

In a world where people constantly interact, travel, move, and use the Internet's full potential, – contacts are unavoidable and cultures meet and mingle regularly. In many of these situations, English has cornered the market and enabled a number of the exchanges we perform (whatever their nature). However, mere language command has never been enough – being aware of how important body language is, aware of the significance of colour, shapes, details, customs, music, scents, and a countless number of attributes, evidently, we need more than language to have a full picture of a culture, of its people – their expectations, wants, needs, because what we see, at the tip of the iceberg, can be misleading. Becoming culturally literate, intelligent and successful takes all of the above into consideration. That is why knowledge of what is common in some other parts of the world in this era of intertwined nationalities, ethnicities, and the sea of characteristics they exhibit, has become not only a preference but a must. Staying in our comfort zones, lulled in our ethnocentric frames can no longer result in a smooth flow – in business, education, travels and other walks of life where we encounter differences; on the contrary, it can easily lead us into the trap of unfounded fears, phobias, prejudices, biases, and discriminatory behaviour. Blindsided, we might fail to communicate messages in the way we think and intend – just because we are not equipped enough for recognising, understanding and accordingly interpreting the behaviour of different peoples coming from unrelated parts of the world.

Verbalising thoughts in an inadequate way can be the root of many misunderstandings and fallen interactions, just like exhibiting inappropriate etiquette – body language, clothes, colours, jewellery, included inter alia. Individuals get offended as we all cherish our inherently engrained facial dimensions and features – we strive to preserve integrity at two levels – by being liked (positive face) and being free (negative face); the significance of face work comes as no surprise. Though the human face is an attribute we all grow and activate in interactions – its features vary across cultures – which makes it even more important in the area of intercultural communication. The expectations and delicacy of our faces will unequivocally depict the qualities of the territories we come from. In this regard, when people from utterly different, distant cultures come together, many different needs *come to the stage* – making such encounters difficult to navigate and to lead to success. While e.g. those representing low-context cultures might expect more independence, and express this in an explicit way, those coming from some high-context cultures would face difficulties understanding this – being very collectively oriented and implicit themselves.

The phenomena mentioned are just a drop in the ocean of values and events that might sow the seeds of misunderstanding, disputes, discrimination, and even breakdowns in communication when different cultures meet. The text *Among Cultures – the Challenge of Communication* examines them all and much more, enlightening them from different angles, equipping the readers with the needed background and activation of the acquired concepts, thus eventually facilitating international encounters and leading to more success with interactions.

Chapter 1 – *What is meant by intercultural communication?* does answer the question in depth; it sets the scene for what is to come, elaborating on communication and its forms *per se*, hardships one might come across in any such encounters and the relevance of this field of study.

Chapter 2 – *What is the relationship between communication and culture?* highlights some of the prominent classifications that point to cultural differences – like those introduced by Hall, that is, low- and high-context cultures, a number of dimensions suggesting how cultures regard the notions of power, time, competitiveness, collaboration, emotions, etc., and what differences in this regard might result in when found in the same *room*.

Chapter 3 – *How can we learn about our own and others' cultures?* introduces some relevant anthropological views and various methods and techniques that might yield a positive outcome in increasing awareness about both ourselves and others. The past and the present meet in this chapter via rituals and narratives.

Chapter 4 – *How is culture related to our identities?* is the one that revolves around the concept of the face – the one we grow as a two-sided coin, both positive and negative, and that possesses countless expectations – coming from the inside and the outside. The chapter observes not only personal but also collective issues – illustrating how our identities are grown, raised, how they behave and interact.

Chapter 5 – *Where can we look to explain verbal misunderstandings?* The name of the chapter does provide us with a hint – and the content confirms it – the chapter brims with linguistic explanations and foundations; thoughts and words meet here via some of the theories proposed by pioneers in the field of linguistics *per se*, and more specifically pragmatics. This relationship is embodied via the phenomenon of speech acts (as well as events) here, to support the hypothesis of how by verbalising anything, we actually make real deeds. Not addressing people properly, or failing to design some speech acts accordingly might be the root of many problems in communication, especially cross-culturally. To avoid this, pragmatics offers many series of maxims – the goal of which is facilitation, enhancement and smooth communication flow.

Chapter 6 – *Where can we look to explain nonverbal misunderstandings?* As the very chapter title suggests, this section of the book calls attention to the kinaesthetic; it emphasises the relevance of body language, as well as the role of our senses – which do receive what we later interpret. In this regard, the chapter pays specific attention to the skill of listening, and spotlights the fact that, although inborn, senses and the ways we listen to them might largely differ from one culture to another. Apart from mere verbalised patterns and those we convey by relying on our body movements, other sense triggers, like colour, and smell, find their place here too. The mentioned concepts are supported in an illustrative way and put under the umbrella of emotional intelligence, going hand in hand with cultural ones.

Chapter 7 – *Why do so many people get treated poorly?* The roots of numerous obstacles we go through or observations in international encounters are depicted via the seventh chapter. As humans, we are prone to stereotypes – always having some hopes and expectations, predicting somebody else's behaviour through the eyes of what we are personally used to. When fed instead of being cultivated properly, such thoughts and emotions inevitably lead to prejudicial behaviour and once they turn to phobias, discrimination becomes imminent. It is the role of this chapter to help us better understand stereotypes and prejudices – open up and work on our ethnocentric views that might be highly potent distractors in our exchanges.

Chapter 8 – *How can we manage conflict in intercultural settings?* When equipped with prejudicial patterns, conflicts await us around the corner and in

intercultural contexts they definitely do not take anyone by surprise. Anyhow, they can be avoided, prevented, or at least mitigated via enough knowledge, skills, and effective strategies, techniques. The eighth part of the text revolves around this issue – suggesting some of the well-known conflict classifications, causes, and serving as a helping hand in the process of conflict resolution. Its final stage, at the same time, the chapter apex, is dedicated to forgiveness, one more time confirming the significance of emotions in communication when cultures meet (which is in harmony of the other book's sections as well).

Chapter 9 – *How can we succeed in our intercultural transitions?* Upon identifying all the differences coming from cultures we meet for the first time, culture shock can appear as an overwhelming emotion, and it often comes in layers. We can remain frozen and contemplate about what took us by surprise – but we can also observe, learn, understand and move on. This is the beginning of our recovery path which can result in either partial or full recovery. After introducing it via the needs we all have, this chapter precisely focuses on the notion of acculturation, its forms, phases, and stories versed in a both seductive and immaculately comprehensive way – to depict different transition directions and accompanying phenomena of this complex process.

Chapter 10 – *Can judgements of right and wrong be made when dealing with other cultures?* It feels that chapter 10 somehow continues where the seventh chapter left off – additionally shedding light on the question of ethics – constraints, guidelines, possibilities, principles and more – that together again lead to success in cross-cultural communication. It also further develops the part dedicated to conflicts, highlighting the possibilities for peaceful resolutions. In support of the text's style – emotions form an integral part of the section, with specific regard to love relationships.

Chapter 11 – *What diversity exists in the study of intercultural communication?* One of the book's mini chapters exemplifies the question posed via a strong case study. However, to enable readers to easily follow, the chapter first sets the scene via an illustrative background comprising theoretical briefs portraying an interpretive, critical and social-scientific perspective in approaching the issues of diversity in intercultural encounters.

Chapter 12 – *How do cultural differences impact our family life?* This mini chapter is of a practical nature and at the same time addresses core family relations – those of partners, and those pertaining to parents and children. But this is not all – how we see, interpret and include many of the previously mentioned notions, essential for forming our identities, in our family matters has also been skilfully integrated here.

Chapter 13 – *What role does culture have in healthcare settings?* This chapter is one those that could be regarded as vocational, specialised in character. It does both raise and answer some questions pertaining to this medical walk of life – but it is not however solely aimed at professionals from the field – on the contrary, its contents can be extremely useful for all of us who do at some point find ourselves in such settings. Despite the delicate nature of healthcare, conflicts, provoked by numerous differences, and/or misinterpretations, can appear and we should be prepared to recognise and address them accordingly.

Chapter 14 – *How do I lead successfully in intercultural organisations and settings?* The previous chapter was dedicated to a specific professional area, i.e., field of human endeavour – and this chapter follows suit – via the managerial topic of leadership that could be specifically challenging when situated in multinational scenarios. Avoiding failure in communication becomes even more important in the world of business – where each decision-making process counts. Understanding differences, nuances, overcoming obstacles and making sense of it all is what this chapter helps us with.

Chapter 15 – *How is our understanding of the environment influenced by our culture?* One might, at first, question the link between communication and the environment but it is via this chapter the link is elaborated. The language used when environmental issues are addressed should be delicately selected and different cultures undoubtedly regard the environment in different ways, sometimes using totally different lenses. As in the modern world, we do travel a lot, and frequently examine the phenomenon of ecotourism as well, this part of the text confirms that the previously mentioned link should not be left on the margins but also taken into account.

Chapter 16 – *How do cultural differences impact our educational experience and outcomes?* International classrooms no longer represent any novelty – quite the opposite, they have become extremely popular over the previous decades and relying on the data available, depicting the numbers of those who both work and study in such classrooms, it seems that their popularity is growing. This is acknowledged via Chapter 16, which illustrates some barriers we might come across as we walk down this path. Apart from diving deep into classroom interaction, the chapter communicates another immensely important topic – one of different needs through the lenses of accessibility. Although the issues raised here can definitely be further elaborated – and do ask for more room, it is a worthy note that they are tackled, with some useful insights and directions provided here.

Chapter 17 – *How does globalisation impact intercultural relationships?* Last but most definitely not least, part of the text also deals with some new-age topics – the central ones being the mass media, and pop-culture, that have, in one way, joined forces and played a significant part in the global village we all belong to. Trendy, accessible, sometimes very seductive, their features can nurture stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, thus giving rise to numerous conflicts; on the other hand, they can equally contribute to more understanding, justification, assimilation – depending both on the contents presented and the lenses we see them through. This chapter reminds us of the fact that filters and critical thinking (in an affirmative sense) should always prevail when consuming the contents surrounding us.

This insightful, extensive, and well-versed text, to wrap it up, in its improved, enriched form, definitely satisfies the need of the majority of those interested in a spectrum of issues inherent to and/or resulting from communication taking place among cultures. Its novelties smoothly go hand in hand with the growing trends, putting the story of intercultural communication in various contexts and observing them in an understandable way. The text will come in useful in many classrooms, as a source teachers rely on, as a self-study book, equally suitable for beginners and those who already know much about the topic, as well as all those who find themselves in such scenarios where meeting other cultures is inevitable and addressing them adequately is preferable. Given the all-encompassing nature of the investigated topic, the book definitely inspires/gives rise to more investigation, poses some questions we all can test when communicating interculturally, while simultaneously giving us solid foundations and directions for any further engagement.