

EFFECTIVE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

A Christian Perspective

A. SCOTT MOREAU
EVVY HAY CAMPBELL
SUSAN GREENER


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What Is Intercultural Communication?

In this chapter we lay some of the important foundations for the rest of the book by defining communication and culture, briefly surveying the development of the discipline, offering a model for the process of communication, and exploring the major approaches and themes found in the contemporary discipline.

DEFINING COMMUNICATION

One of the early problems facing the discipline involved the meaning of the two terms at its heart: culture and communication. Neither was clearly or even adequately defined (Saral 1978, 389–90; Kramsch 2002; Levine, Park, and Kim 2007). Although many definitions for each term have been proposed over the decades, there is still no single set on which everyone agrees.

With that in mind, how do we communicate? As early as 1970, almost one hundred definitions of communication had appeared in print (Mortensen 1972, 14). A very general definition is “communication occurs whenever persons attribute significance to message-related behavior.”

This definition implies several postulates (Mortensen 1972, 14–21; compare with Porter and Samovar 1982, 30). First, communication is *dynamic*: it is not a static “thing” but a dynamic *process* that maintains stability and identity through all its fluctuations.

Second, communication is *irreversible*: the very fact that communication has occurred (or is occurring) means that the persons in communication have changed, however subtly. The fact that we have memories means that once we begin the process, there is no “reset” button; we cannot begin again as blank slates.

Third, communication is *proactive*: in communicating we are not merely passive respondents to external stimuli. When we communicate, we enter the process totally and are proactive, selecting, amplifying, and manipulating the signals that come to us.

Fourth, communication is *interactive* on two fronts: the intrapersonal, or what goes on inside each communicator; and the interpersonal, or what takes place between communicators. We must pay attention to both fronts to understand the communication process.

Finally, communication is *contextual*: it always happens in a larger context, be that the physical environment, the emotional mood of the communication event, or the purposes (which may be overt or hidden) behind the communication.

DEFINING CULTURE

As beings made in God’s image and created with the need to learn, grow, and order our world, we learn the rules of the society in which we grow up. Those rules provide us with maps to understand the world around us. None of us escapes the fact that she or he is a cultural creature, and culture has a deep impact on communication.

At the same time, trying to understand any culture is like trying to hit a moving target. Your culture—like all cultures—is not rigid and static. It is dynamic. The rules you learned while growing up will not be identical to the

One foundational rule that people who are communicating across cultural divides must keep in mind [is this]: . . . people interpret your words and actions in ways that make sense to them. Often, therefore, what you think you are communicating is not what they are receiving. If nothing else, knowing this may help you be more humble in attempting to convey the greatest message of all.

Moreau, Corwin, and McGee
2004, 267–68, emphasis in original

rules you pass on to your own children, especially in technologically advanced settings. Scott still remembers learning how to use a mouse for a computer, while his children acquired the skill at such an early age that they have no memories of learning how to use one.

But what is this thing we all are immersed in that is called “culture”? In 1952, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (38–40, 149) compiled at least 164 definitions of culture for analysis and used close to 300 definitions in their book! One of the reasons culture is so difficult to define is simply because it is so deeply a part of each of us. Every interpretation we make—even every observation—is molded by culture.

One of the most commonly cited definitions is that of Clifford Geertz, who defines culture as a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embedded and expressed in symbols that are used to communicate, perpetuate, and develop . . . knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (1973, 89). In this concise definition, Geertz indicates both the breadth and depth of culture, helping to frame its richness and complexity.

However we may choose to define culture, it is clear that it is a dynamic (Moreau 1995, 121) and interconnected (Hall 1976, 16–17) pattern that is learned (Hofstede 1991, 5) and transmitted from one generation to the next through symbols (Geertz 1973, 89) that are consciously and unconsciously framed (Hall 1983, 230) and shared by a group of people (Dahl 2004, 4); this pattern enables them to interpret the behaviors of others (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 4).

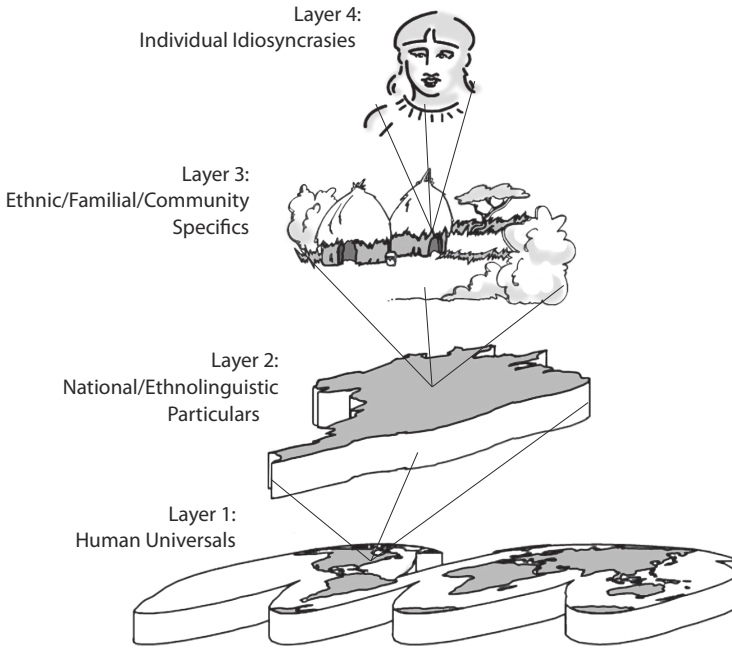
At the same time, culture is neither monolithic nor homogeneous. We can recognize at least four layers of culture (fig. 1.1; see also Hofstede 1991, 6–7; Hesselgrave 1978; Levine, Park, and Kim 2007, 211). The first layer encompasses the universals we all share as humans, including not only such things as language, institutions, values, and sociability, but also our bearing God’s image, our need for relationships, our ability to learn and grow, and so on. We elaborate more on these universals later in the discussion of the common human core.

The second layer includes the specific values and worldview of the largest cultural (or national) unit that people identify as their own. They provide the rule book by which people from that culture operate in meeting their universal needs.

The third layer involves the reality that many of us are part of subcultures within the larger societal or national setting. Much intercultural communication research focuses on the second and third layers.

The fourth and final layer in the diagram reflects that people—even those of the most collective cultures—are still individuals and choose how they will live by cultural rules and regulations. It also reflects that as a genetically unique

FIGURE 1.1
THE LAYERS OF CULTURE



person who has a unique history, everyone has varying skills in applying his or her cultural rules to the situations of life. This is the layer at which individual idiosyncrasy emerges. Some cultures allow this layer to be valued, while others value less idiosyncrasy and greater harmony and conformity.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

There are several realities that characterize all communication, whether intercultural or not. They are true of communication in every context (see Moreau, Corwin, and McGee 2004, 266–67). First, everything that we do “communicates”—it is *impossible* for us to stop communicating (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967).

Second, the goal of communication is always more than just to impart information—persuasion is behind everything we do. Even a simple “hello” is an act that requests a response or an acknowledgment of your existence and relationship with the person to whom you say, “Hello” (Berlo 1960, 12).

Third, the communication process is generally far more complex than most people realize. Because we have been communicating for so long, and because

we do it all the time, we have the tendency to take it for granted (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, 180; Filbeck 1985, 2–3).

Fourth, we always communicate our messages through more than one channel, and we always communicate more than one message. At times, these “multiple” messages may contradict one another, causing our audience to respond negatively to our primary concern. At other times, they enhance and reinforce our message, helping to elicit a more positive response from our audience (Kraft 1983, 76).

Fifth, and finally, if we seek to communicate effectively across cultural barriers, the foundational consideration for all our communication should be, “What can I do to build trust on the part of the audience?” (see Mayers 1974, 30–79).

TERMINOLOGY

The discipline of intercultural communication has remained largely within communication studies, though its genesis came from anthropologists (Kitao 1985), and recently calls have been made for anthropology to add its voice to the ongoing discussion (e.g., Coertze 2000). Today the discipline of intercultural communication includes interracial communication, interethnic communication, cross-cultural communication, and international communication (Kitao 1985, 8–9; see table 1.1 for terminology).

WORKING MODEL OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

In figure 1.2 we present a working model of the communication process (see also, e.g., Mortensen 1972; Applbaum et al. 1973; Hesselgrave 1991b, 51; Singer 1987, 70; Poyatos 1983; Dodd 1991, 5; Gudykunst and Kim 1992, 33; Eilers 1999, 242–43; Klopff 2001, 50; and Neuliep 2009, 25). In it we have Participant A, Participant B, and a whole host of communication issues within and between each. To make the following discussion easier to follow, we refer to Participant A as Megumi (from Japan) and Participant B as Jabulani (from Swaziland).

Communication Participant A (Source-Respondent)

The left side depicts Megumi, in this case the one who initiates communication and then responds to the feedback that comes from Jabulani. One of Megumi’s purposes will be to convey some type of “meaning” to Jabulani such that they share understanding of what is being communicated.

TABLE 1.1
TERMINOLOGY

Term	Basic Concept
Intercultural communication	Communication between members from differing cultural backgrounds (Y. Y. Kim 1984, 16).
Cross-cultural communication	Comparison of the same communication phenomenon in two or more cultures (Gudykunst and Kim 1992, 14).
Interracial communication	Communication between members of differing racial groups (Rich 1974; see also Jackson and Garner 1998).
Interethnic communication	Communication between members of differing ethnic groups (Rich 1974; see also Jackson and Garner 1998).
International communication	Formal communication at national levels related to a political situation (Sitaram 1980, 91–92) or communication that flows between nation-states (Braman, Shah, and Fair 2001, 161; see also H. Schwartz 1969).
Intercommunication	Communication that crosses national or cultural boundaries (Prosser 1973).
Cultural communication	Communication within a particular culture or subculture (Y. Y. Kim 2001b, 147).
Intracultural communication	Communication between individuals of the same culture (Sitaram 1980, 93).
Minority communication	Communication between the people of two subcultures within a dominant culture (Sitaram 1980, 93).
Transracial communication	The understanding that persons from differing ethnic or racial backgrounds can achieve in verbal interaction (Arthur Smith 1971).
Transcultural communication	Communication that assumes there are universal constants (e.g., prohibitions against murder or incest; Christian doctrines about God, Christ, humanity, etc.) and relates them to communication (Küster 2005, 418).

Adapted in part from Saral 1978.

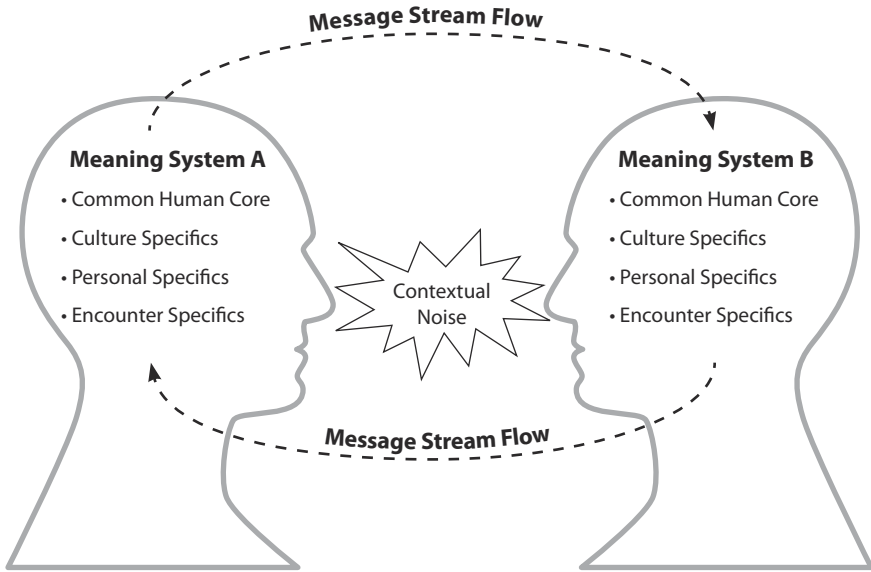
Our first dilemma is determining what is meant by the term “meaning” (on the different theories of how things “mean” and the steps we take to discover “meaning,” see Hesselgrave 1978, 44–50). Ultimately, as David Hesselgrave points out:

Meaning is in a sense contractual. Only by agreement in the area of semantics can we think about the same “thing.” Only by agreement on the relationships that exist between linguistic symbols can we say anything significant about the “thing.” And only as we agree on standards of right and wrong, truth and error, and good and bad can we make value judgments about any “thing.” (1978, 40; note also Carson’s discussion of this issue, 1985, 207–8)

MEANING SYSTEM

For Megumi to choose what signals to use to convey meaning, she will need to encode the message she wants to convey. A lifetime of sensory inputs

FIGURE 1.2
A SIMPLIFIED WORKING MODEL OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS



forms a reservoir of meaning in her. Past experiences and future expectations interact with the “now” to produce meanings. No two persons receive identical sensory impressions of a single event, nor do individuals respond in the same way that others respond. Each person develops a unique “meaning system” that is constantly changing. Each participant’s meaning system is invisible to the other participant.

Four major components comprise the total meaning system within each participant: (1) the common human core; (2) the specific culture of the individual; (3) the specific idiosyncratic nature of the person; and (4) the specifics of this particular communication event. All four components are woven together and enable Megumi to choose how to convey her message in a way that she assumes Jabulani will understand. We briefly touch on each of these components in turn.

THE COMMON HUMAN CORE

These are core aspects of our humanity that are common to all people. As noted by Scott Moreau:

People of all races and ethnic identities share the fact and experiences of being human. Universals found in every culture include, among other things, language, thought, the process of enculturation, myth frameworks, authority structures,

and the many institutions necessary for survival of human societies (e.g., kinship, economics, education, politics, recreation, various types of association, health, transportation, etc.). (1995, 122)

However, these core aspects include not only those things that anthropologists see but also things appropriately discerned from biblical revelation (following Moreau 1995): we are all made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–31); we have a purpose for our existence (Gen. 1:27; Isa. 43:7); we are all physical creatures with physical needs (food, water, shelter, etc.; Gen. 2:7); we are all thinking (psychological and cognitive) creatures (Gen. 2:16); we are social creatures who are not meant to stand alone (Gen. 2:18–25); we are all sinful creatures in need of redemption (Rom. 3:23; 6:23); we all have access to the general revelation about God (Rom. 1:20–21).

CULTURAL SPECIFICS

In addition to the core shared by all people, each participant also has cultural specifics that frame the way he or she sees and understands the world. This component of the meaning system includes such things as worldview, religion, values, social structures and roles, and decision-making rules. At this juncture we must point out that some discussions have focused on issues of language and power and how the labels we choose will be those that tend to maintain the status quo for those who are in positions of power (see, e.g., discussions of how we define the “other” in Fabian 1983; Mudimbe 1988).

PERSONAL SPECIFICS

Not all people operate in congruence with their culture. To think that because a person is from a collective culture (see chap. 11) she will always act as we expect a collective person to act is to commit what is called the ecological fallacy. Further, even in the most collective of subcultures, people are not identical. Ways in which they are not identical include such things as cognitive style, God-given communication skills, knowledge, personality, total history of relationship with other(s), and life history and experiences. Each person has her own gifts, tendencies, and stories, and each brings those into communication acts. They provide an important part of the framing of how Megumi will choose to encode the messages she wishes to send.

ENCOUNTER SPECIFICS

Finally, in addition to these three components, elements of the encounter itself partially determine how messages are encoded. These include the emotional/physical state or mood of Megumi at the time of the communication act; her degree of empathy, trust, and authenticity; her defensiveness; her understanding of the use of public and private cues in context; her motivations

and the way she strategizes to accomplish her goals in this setting; and her current attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about Jabulani.

It is easy to see why understanding even a single communication event is such a complex process. Currently it is beyond our ability to devise some type of calculus by which we may compute the entire system; perhaps—due to such things as human choice and abilities—we may never devise such a calculus, even if we reached a stage at which we could agree on all the “inputs” into the system. After all, the reality of human choice in and of itself seems beyond human calculations.

THE CODING PROCESS

In any event, once Megumi chooses the message she wants to convey, on the basis of her meaning system she encodes the message into various channels in order to communicate with Jabulani. As Hesselgrave notes, “The word *communication* comes from the Latin word *communis* (common). We must establish a ‘commonness’ with someone to have communication. That ‘commonness’ is to be found in mutually shared codes” (1978, 31).

As with the meaning system, we can identify a set of components that are part of the coding and transmission process, such as preverbal coding and the actual physical coding (Applbaum et al. 1973, 36–38).

PREVERBAL CODING

Megumi experiences a need to communicate that comes from her own meaning systems. Much of this stage of preverbal coding involves feelings for which words are not attached. The meaning is private and frequently is not verbally expressed. Feedback loops operate within Megumi as she processes the preverbal encoding process in preparation for the next stage. For example, she may choose to use a particular word, and then, after she thinks about it and how that word might impact Jabulani, she may select a different word that seems more appropriate. This process occurs before and during the actual physical coding.

TRANSMISSION OF THE MESSAGE THROUGH PHYSICAL CODING

At this point Megumi “transmits” her message through signals (verbal and extraverbal) based on her preverbal coding. The actual encoding used depends on her needs in the situation and her experience with communication.

Verbal codes refer to language, whether written or oral. Though words (especially nouns) have external referents, the actual words we use do not “contain meaning” in and of themselves. Their meaning is an agreed-upon one chosen by the group using that code. “Friend” could mean anything an English-speaking culture (or audience) wants it to mean, but the meaning in

common use today is a person who is on good terms with you. The meaning of “friend” is inherent not in the word but in the English-speaking world’s agreement on its use.

Note that within the verbal codes, tonal stresses and emphases are also codes in the communication process. As with the words themselves, tonal emphases derive their meaning from the people who use them, not from an inherent quality.

Extraverbal codes come in a bewildering variety of forms. They include oral signals (“hmmm”), hand gestures, posture, eye contact, smell, physical spacing (e.g., between source and respondent), position (placement of the head higher or lower than the head of the respondent), touch, leg position, and so on. Each form can carry many messages that intercultural communicators may miss or communicate improperly if they are not sensitive to their audience.

Media are the “vehicles” used in transmitting the message. The type of media chosen will have a definite impact on how the respondents will perceive the message. Each media channel has its own advantages and disadvantages, which should be understood if we are to communicate as effectively as possible.

Redundancy refers to how all messages have redundant elements, often simply because they are communicated along more than one channel simultaneously. Note this sentence:

SH PRFRS CRM ND SGR N HR T

The missing vowels are not even necessary for most people to understand the sentence. Today this is most easily seen in instant and text messaging, where a whole new code for commonly used terms has been developed. The extra letters (e.g., vowels in the above sentence) reinforce the message and help to ensure its clarity (that she prefers cream and sugar in her tea), but they are not necessary for the message to be understood.

Entropy refers to the reality that every message suffers from a certain degree of randomness or uncertainty. Whether this happens in transmission (due to deterioration in the encoding, the transmission itself, or in the decoding processes) or in distortion caused by noise and context, it affects all human communication to some extent. Note this string of letters from which you are asked to make a sentence:

GODISNOWHERE

We see the effects of entropy when a person has to decide whether to read “God is nowhere” or “God is now here.”

Noise is any sensory data that is part of the context of communication but is not part of the actual communication event itself. It may either enhance or detract from the communication process. Do not confuse “noise” here with mere sounds; it also includes nonauditory “noise.” This may be a headache from an argument with a close friend just prior to the communication event. It may be something taken for granted such as the weather, the time of day, or the season. It may include distractions from the competing agendas of each person participating in the event, and so on (see Larson 1966; Wendland 1995).

TOTAL MESSAGE STREAM

The verbal codes, extraverbal codes (including redundant elements), media, redundancy, entropy, and noise all combine to produce what we can call the “total message stream,” which refers to all the sensory information that reaches Respondent B in the communication event.

Communication Participant B (Respondent-Source)

In our example, Jabulani serves in mirror fashion to Megumi. Based in part on the total message stream, Jabulani determines what he understands the message to be. This means not that there is no message in an absolute sense but only that the recipient of the communication is the one who decides what he understands the message to be.

RECEPTION OF THE TOTAL MESSAGE STREAM

All physical senses come into play in receiving the total data stream. Jabulani hears, sees, feels, (possibly) smells, and (possibly) tastes the data sent by Megumi, which is by now intermingled with the noise of the context and the entropy inherent in all messages.

As the message is received, Jabulani begins the process of decoding it so that he can understand what Megumi is communicating. He does so from within the context of his own meaning framework, not hers. If she wants to be understood, she has to take this into account in her encoding process. This is what it means to be receptor oriented in communication (Kraft 2005a; see sidebar 1.1).

To decode the total message stream, Jabulani must attend to the physical data that are part of the stream. Sound waves are turned into words, words are translated into the appropriate thoughts based on other things such as emphasis, tone of voice, hand or other bodily gestures, facial expression, the surrounding context, and what Jabulani knows of Megumi’s communication patterns (e.g., she was taught to avoid saying no in a direct fashion).

SIDEBAR 1.1**IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES RELATED TO RECEPTORS**

Kraft (2005a, 156–59, emphasis in original)

1. *Receptors are parts of reference groups.* Receptors (like all humans) are never alone, even when they are “by themselves.” Whether one lives in an individualistic society, [as] Americans do, or in a strongly group-oriented society, like those of the [Majority] World, we always consider the reactions of others when we make decisions.
2. *Receptors are committed to their group and to the values of that group.* When approaches are made to people to make changes in their attitudes and/or behavior, it cannot be assumed that they are not already committed to competing attitudes and/or behavior.
3. If Christian appeals are to be attractive they need to be addressed to the *felt needs* of the receptors. An important thing to recognize, though, is that humans never seem to be fully satisfied with their state in life. And no sociocultural system seems to adequately provide for every need felt by the people within that system.
4. *Receptors are always interpreting.* And everything about the communicational situation gets interpreted. . . . Interpretation is clearly one of the most important, though least conscious, of the activities of receptors.
5. These interpretations feed directly into the most important of the receptors’ activities, that of *constructing the meanings* that result from the communicational interaction. . . . It is messages, not meanings, that are transmitted from person to person.
6. Receptors, then, either *grant or withhold permission* for any given message to enter what might be termed the receptor’s “communicational space.” Receptors may be pictured as enclosed in a kind of bubble which only they can give permission to enter. When someone wants to transact or negotiate some form of communication, then, he/she needs to gain permission for the interaction from the one who can control access to that bubble.
7. Closely related to the activity of giving permission is that of *evaluating the message*. In any communicational interaction the participants evaluate each component of that experience. . . . From this evaluation the participants construct an overall impression of the situation, an impression that has much to do with how they interpret what goes on in that situation.
8. Another closely related kind of activity in which receptors are engaged is the matter of *selectivity*. People are selective in the kinds of things they allow themselves to be exposed to. . . . People tend to perceive messages in such a way that they confirm already held positions, whether or not the communicator intended them that way.
9. Receiving communication is a risky business. Receptors are, therefore, continually *seeking to maintain their equilibrium* in the face of such actual

or imagined risk. Whenever people expose themselves to communication they are risking the possibility that they might have to change some aspect of their lives. People ordinarily seek at all costs to maintain their present equilibrium, to protect themselves from assimilating anything that is perceived to possibly upset their psychological balance.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are several implications or applications for evangelism in a new cultural setting for any one of these principles?
2. Using the same principle, what are several implications or applications for church planting in a new cultural setting?

The total data stream contains far more information than is needed for the communication event to take place. It is apparent that if Jabulani were to consciously attend to every detail of the total message stream, it would overwhelm him. Therefore, Jabulani both consciously and unconsciously filters out or ignores what he perceives to be irrelevant data (e.g., traffic outside the room, the hum of machinery, the smell of food from next door, the coolness of air blowing on skin, words that are verbal fillers). The selection of “relevancy” is determined by a variety of factors included in Jabulani’s meaning system, which has been developed over the course of his life as he learned from parents, peers, and other people important to him how to decode messages that come to him. Hopefully his decoding system is the same as Megumi’s coding system, or else they will misunderstand each other, possibly with severe consequences.

INTERPRETING THE DECODED AND FILTERED MESSAGE STREAM INTO A “MESSAGE”

Once the message, at least on the literal, denotative level, is understood, it is interpreted on the connotative level. For example, if Jabulani believes that Megumi cannot be trusted, even when properly understood, he may not believe her no matter how sincere she is. Again, the interpretation stems from the totality of factors in Jabulani’s meaning system.

RESPONDING TO THE PERCEIVED MESSAGE THROUGH FEEDBACK

As Megumi is communicating her message, Jabulani is giving her feedback. This may come through eye contact, gestures, touch, proximity, and/or para-verbal or verbal channels. In effect, they are both now operating simultaneously as sender and receiver, negotiating what they want to communicate and what they think was communicated in a type of dance in which conscious and unconscious signals are sent and received.

Once Jabulani has interpreted Megumi’s message (whether rightly or wrongly), he decides how he will respond and follows roughly the same process that Megumi followed in trying to communicate with him.

The net effect is that Jabulani determines his understanding of the message Megumi sought to convey. Thus, her (and our) focus in intercultural communication must be on Jabulani (the audience) as much as on the message. Not only must we be sure we have perceived the message clearly; we must also seek to make that message clear to the audience in their terms. Moreover, Jabulani, as the receptor, makes the decision whether to grant, withhold, or even withdraw permission for Megumi to enter his “communicational space” (Kraft 1995, 97–105).

CONCLUSION

With the foundation set, you now have the background not only to understand the discussion that follows but also to see how it fits into the larger discipline. Before we can move in that direction, however, we need to integrate Christian insights into communication and consider the story lines of intercultural communication in light of the church’s actions throughout history and the recent development of Christian thinking about the discipline. As you read through the case study at the end of this chapter, consider the type of advice you might give Muhia, bearing in mind that direct confrontation of Mark is something he would find exceedingly difficult to do.

CASE STUDY: PUTTING THINGS INTO PRACTICE

A. SCOTT MOREAU

Muhia was dismayed as he listened to his friend Mark give a training seminar to an African group on how to communicate Christ. Mark had studied anthropology and had even written a brilliant paper under a local missionary’s supervision on issues related to communication from an anthropological perspective. *If Mark could only see how they applied to what he was teaching*, thought Muhia, *Mark would make a great cross-cultural trainer!*

Muhia’s frustration started during the seminar when Mark began to talk about

eye contact. Mark noted that children who do not look you in the eye are hiding something, so he stressed the need to ensure that when you share your faith you look the person you are sharing with in the eyes and be sure that the person is looking directly at you. Otherwise, Mark related, you could not be certain that the person was really listening and you could not trust his or her response.

Muhia cringed as he listened to this part of the talk. He vividly remembered learning from his parents to never look an

adult in the eye. For them (and for Muhia), direct eye contact from a younger person to an older or more respected person was an expression of rebellion, not of paying attention! He could never forget the day a classmate of his in grade 12 was caned by a teacher for looking that teacher in the eye. It was not that you could *never* look into the eyes of an older person; it was *holding* the eye contact that was bad.

Muhia knew that Mark meant well, and that Mark had put a lot of time into preparing for his training sessions. He also knew that Mark would feel humiliated if Muhia pointed out what he had done wrong, since Mark prided himself on his cultural sensitivity. Even worse, the very idea of

telling someone to his face that he had just made such a big mistake completely violated Muhia's rules of being a good host, and Mark was, after all, a guest in Muhia's country.

REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What could Muhia do that would honor his own rules against direct confrontation but help Mark be a better trainer in the future?
2. What might you say to Mark to help him better understand the cultural values in his setting?