HANDOUT 2 BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Objectives of lesson two

1- List the barriers to effective and appropriate intercultural communication

2- Give an example of ethnocentrism that demonstrates it as a barrier to intercultural communication

3- Distinguish between stereotypes, prejudice, and racism and show how each is a barrier to intercultural communication

Introduction

La Ray M. Barna (1997) developed a list of *six barriers* to effective and appropriate intercultural communication: *anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations, and language.* Her categories of barriers are used here when discussing problems that can arise in intercultural encounters. The first four kinds of barriers are discussed in this hand-out. Nonverbal misinterpretations and language are discussed in Jandt (2021: available on demand). Taking these common mistakes into account can help you improve your intercultural communication skills.

1- Anxiety

The first barrier is high Anxiety. When you are anxious due to not knowing what you are expected to do, it's only natural to focus on that feeling and not be totally present in the communication transaction.

For example, you may have experienced anxiety on your very first day on a new college campus or in a new job. You may have been so conscious of being new—and out of place—and focused so much of your attention on that feeling that you made common mistakes and appeared awkward to others. Sugawara (1993) surveyed 168 Japanese employees of Japanese companies working in the United States and 135 of their U.S. coworkers. Only 8% of the U.S. coworkers felt impatient with the Japanese coworkers' English. While 19% of the Japanese employees felt their spoken English was poor or very poor and 20% reported feeling nervous when speaking English with U.S. coworkers, 30% of the Japanese employees felt the U.S. coworkers were impatient with their accent. Almost 60% believed that language was the problem in communicating with the U.S. coworkers. For some, anxiety over speaking English properly contributed to avoiding interactions with the U.S. coworkers and limiting interactions both on and off the job.

The German sociologist Georg Simmel's (1858–1918) concepts of "the stranger" and "social distance" were precursors to *C. R. Berger and Calabrese's (1975) anxiety/uncertainty reduction theory* (Rogers, 1999). This theory assumes that during the initial phase of interaction with another person, your primary communication goal is to reduce your uncertainty about that person. Thus, you are attempting to discover information about the other person and to share information about yourself.

Gudykunst and his colleagues (see, e.g., Gudykunst, 1983, 1985) have applied this theory to intercultural communication by further developing *the concept of the stranger.* Strangers are people who are members of other groups who act in ways different from one's own culture. When encountering strangers, one experiences uncertainty and anxiety and is unsure how to behave. Uncertainty means not knowing what the reactions of strangers will be and not knowing how to explain the reactions of strangers. Anxiety arises when a person is apprehensive about initial interactions. When anxiety is high, we tend to avoid interactions, and when it is too low, we tend not to care what happens in the interaction.

2- Assuming Similarity Instead of Difference

The second barrier is assuming similarity instead of difference. A middle-class Angolan teenager may purchase a CD of American music. Does that demonstrate that all teenagers like the same music? The cultural difference may be in how teenagers listen to that music: The Angolan teenager probably will play the music in communal fashion for several people to listen, dance, and sing along. Most probably in the United States, the teenager will listen to the

music alone with earbuds. Four Spaniards may meet at a McDonald's in Madrid. They may order Big Macs®, french fries, and milkshakes. Does that demonstrate that we all like the same food? The cultural difference may be in the rituals of dining together in Spain. Most probably the Spaniards will not rush their meal, and the person who invited the others will pay as it is very unlikely each will pay for individual portions. When you assume similarity between cultures, you can be caught unaware of important differences.

When you have no information about a new culture, it might make sense to assume no differences exist, to behave as you would in your home culture. But making that assumption could result in miscommunication. A Danish woman left her 14-month-old baby girl in a stroller outside a Manhattan restaurant while she was inside. Other diners at the restaurant became concerned and called the police. The woman was charged with endangering a child and was jailed for two nights. Her child was placed in foster care. The woman and the Danish consulate explained that leaving children unattended outside cafés is common in Denmark. Pictures were wired to the police showing numerous strollers parked outside cafés while parents were eating inside. The Danish woman had assumed that Copenhagen is similar to New York and that what is commonly done in Copenhagen is also commonly done in New York.

School districts in the United States have been accused of assuming similarity by groups such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Muslims pray five times a day and require space to unfurl a prayer rug, face Mecca, and touch their head to the floor. Muslim parents have asked schools to recognize difference and become more accommodating to Muslim students.

Each culture is different and unique to some degree. Boucher (1974), for example, has shown how cultures differ in terms of to whom it is appropriate to display emotions. If you assume that display of emotions is similar to your culture, you might see people of different cultures in certain circumstances as lacking emotion and people in other circumstances as displaying emotions inappropriately.

The inverse can be a barrier as well. Assuming difference instead of similarity can lead to one not recognizing important things that cultures share in common.

It's better to assume nothing. It's better to ask, "What are the customs?" than to assume they are the same —or different—everywhere.

3- Ethnocentrism

The third barrier to effective intercultural communication is Ethnocentrism, or ***negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture.*** To be ethnocentric is to believe in the superiority of one's own culture. Everything in a culture is consistent to that culture and makes sense if you understand that culture. For example, assume that climate change is a fact and, as a result, assume that summers in the United States average 43°C (109°F). It would be logical to make adjustments: Rather than air-conditioning buildings all day, you might close schools and businesses in the afternoons to conserve energy. Such adjustments would make sense. Why, then, do some people attribute sensible midday siestas in hot climates to laziness?

In contrast to ethnocentrism, ***Cultural relativism*** refers to the view that an individual's beliefs and behaviors should be understood only in terms of that person's own culture. It does not mean that everything is equal. It does mean that we must try to understand other people's behavior in the context of their culture. It also means that we recognize the arbitrary nature of our own cultural behaviors and are willing to reexamine them by learning about behaviors in other cultures (M. N. Cohen, 1998).

A less extreme form of ethnocentrism can be labeled ***cultural nearsightedness,*** or taking one's own culture for granted and neglecting other cultures. For example, people in the United States often use the word Americans to refer to U.S. citizens, but actually that word is the correct designation of all people in North and South America. Its careless use is a form of ethnocentrism.

Cultural nearsightedness often results in making assumptions that simple things are the same everywhere. Designing forms for something as simple as a person's name is not that simple if you recognize how widely practices vary. For example, in Mexico, people may have two surnames, with the first from the father's first surname and the second from the mother's surname. Often, only the first surname is used and the second abbreviated. When a woman marries, she usually retains both of her surnames and adds her husband's first surname. Consider China, with 1.4 billion people and only about 4,000 surnames, with 85% of the population sharing 100 of them. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, nearly 93 million people share the

name Wang—the most common surname in the world. Second most occurring is Li, with some 92 million Chinese. The most prevalent surname in the United States, Smith, is shared by 2.4 million people.

Another example is *Eurocentric ethnocentrism*. This would include, for example, recognizing only Western holidays in schools or basing curriculum only on Western history, music, and art. The terms the West and the East themselves have been labeled **Eurocentric ethnocentrism**. Asia is east of Europe, but to call Asia "the East" makes its identity dependent on Europe.

Extreme ethnocentrism leads to a rejection of the richness and knowledge of other cultures. It impedes communication and blocks the exchange of ideas and skills among peoples. Because it excludes other points of view, an ethnocentric orientation is restrictive and limiting.

4- Stereotypes and Prejudice

Stereotypes and prejudice are a pernicious stumbling block to intercultural communication. *Stereotype* is the broader term and is commonly used to refer to *negative or positive judgments made about individuals based on any observable or believed group membership. Prejudice refers to the irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group, race, religion, or sexual orientation.* The terms are related in that they both refer to making judgments about individuals based on group membership. It's generally agreed that Racism is prejudice with the exercise of power on or over the group through institutional, historical, and structural means (Hoyt, 2012).

Stereotypes

The word stereotyping was first used by journalist Walter Lippmann in 1922 to describe judgments made about others on the basis of their ethnic group membership. Today, the term is more broadly used to refer to judgments made on the basis of any group membership. Psychologists have attempted to explain stereotyping as mistakes our brains make in the perception of other people that are similar to those mistakes our brains make in the perception of visual illusions (Nisbett, 1980). When information is ambiguous, the brain often reaches the wrong conclusion.

Negative Effects on Communication

Stereotypes are harmful because they impede communication in at least four ways:

1. They cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true when it may not be. Research conducted by Gordon Allport (1954) showed, for example, that the prevalent stereotype of Armenians as dishonest was proved false when a credit-reporting association gave the group credit ratings as good as those given others. Although you may think of stereotypes as being negative judgments, they can be positive as well. Some people hold positive stereotypes of other individuals based on their professional group membership. For example, some people assume that all doctors are intelligent and wise.

2. Continued use of the stereotype reinforces the belief. Stereotypes of women as ornaments, people of color as stupid or licentious, and gay men as promiscuous reinforce a belief that places individual women, people of color, and gay men at risk. Popular television may reinforce those stereotypes. Shaheen (1984), for example, has cited the four Western myths about Arabs as shown on television: Arabs are wealthy, barbaric, sex maniacs, and terrorist minded.

3. Stereotypes also impede communication when they cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true of any one individual. For example, if a group is stereotyped as dishonest, that does not mean that any one individual in that group is dishonest. A classic psychology study in the 1970s had two groups of undergraduates read stories about a woman. The stories were identical, except that one had the sentence "Betty is now a lesbian." On a test one week later, individuals in the group who had read that Betty is a lesbian were much more likely than individuals in the other group to recall having read that Betty never dated men. In fact, the story that both groups had read stated that Betty dated men occasionally. The group's stereotype of a lesbian influenced what they recalled having read (Snyder & Uranowitz, 1978). Do you think that stereotype is commonly held today?

The stereotype can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the person stereotyped. Research by psychologists Steele and Aronson (1995) has shown that a negative stereotype creates a threat that can distract the individual stereotyped and lower performance.

Hamilton and Harwood (1997) note that while cultural differences may be the most visible among people, they may not be the differences most likely to cause conflict. The authors warn against treating people as members of a cultural group without recognizing their individuality and other identities that might be important to them.

Whereas stereotypes can be positive or negative, prejudice refers to the irrational dislike, suspicion, or hatred of a particular group, race, religion, or sexual orientation (Rothenberg, 1992). Persons within the group are viewed not in terms of their individual merit but according to the superficial characteristics that make them part of the group. Psychologists have identified the highly prejudiced individual as having an **Authoritarian personality** (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). Such persons tend to overgeneralize and think in bipolar terms; they are highly conventional, moralistic, and uncritical of higher authority. Highly prejudiced people are unlikely to change their attitudes even when presented with new and conflicting information.

Racism

Racism is not simply prejudice. **Racism is the belief and practice of racial privilege or social advantages based on race.** The term came into common usage in the 1930s to describe the alleged Nazi persecution of the Jews. Nazi belief was that humanity comprises biologically distinct subspecies and that some are inherently superior and others inherently inferior (Fredrickson, 2002). Examine racism in the following examples of India, and White privilege in the United States.

CASE STUDY 1 : INDIA

Figure 01: A candlelight vigil against racism and the beating and killing of a 19-year-old student in India's North Eastern Region. **Source:** Hindustan Times/Hindustan Times/Getty Images

One example today is found in the northeastern portion of India. Some people from there say they are the target of racism for having "Asian" facial features. Most northeastern Indians at some time have experienced culturally insensitive questions, such as "Is it true you eat snakes?" Many are on the receiving end of namecalling and racial slurs, such as chinki and chow mein. So widespread is this racism that in 2012 the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs determined that the use of the term chinki to refer to people in the northeast would be considered a criminal offense with a penalty of up to 5 years in jail. Activists in the region charge that the law is rarely enforced as police are as likely as anyone to participate in the harassment.

CASE STUDY 2: WHITE PRIVILEGE

In the 1930s, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote of White supremacy as a global phenomenon (1935 reissued in 1995). Later, Theodore W. Allen introduced the term White privilege, which later was popularized by Peggy McIntosh (1989). She uses the term to describe how a dominant culture empowers some:

As a white person, I have realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each and every day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks. (paras. 2– 3, https://nationalseedproject.org/white privilege-unpacking-the-invisible-knapsack).

McIntosh (1994) uses a comparison to being right-handed. Pick up a pair of scissors, grasp a door handle, and sit at a student's desk. They are all designed for right-handed people. Yet right-handed people do not tend to recognize

how the world favors right-handedness. White culture resulted from a synthesis of ideas, values, and beliefs inherited from European ethnic groups in the United States. As the dominant culture in the United States, White culture is the foundation of social norms and organizations.

Figure 02: Suspected far-right extremist with 'white privilege' card charged; pipe bombs found at Napa business. Source: The San Francisco Chronicle. https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Suspected-far-right-extremist-with-White-15903047.php

White privilege exists in the United States as well as other nations, particularly South Africa (Drzewiecka & Steyn, 2009). Scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that White people in the United States are observed by other groups to be distinct, superior, and unapproachable, whereas Whites themselves are relatively unaware of their racial identity compared to people of color (Bahk & Jandt, 2003, 2004; Dyer, 1997; Hayman & Levit, 1997; Katz & Ivey, 1977).

People of color are likely to be more aware of a racial identity and associate inferior traits with skin color. Racial categorization is prevalent, especially among people who live in a multiracial society. When given a list of racial categories, most people can identify their own racial group and those of others (Montepare & Opeyo, 2002). This perception of racial disparity can lead to socially constructed stereotypes and prejudice to influence interracial communication.

In one study conducted by Maddox and Gray (2002), participants were presented with photographs of Black discussants and statements made by the discussants. The skin tone (lightness and darkness) of discussants was varied in the photographs. The participants were asked to match each of the statements with the photograph of the discussant who they believed made the statement. The study found that both Black and White participants used race as an organizing principle in their perceptions—participants tended to associate positive traits with light-skinned Blacks and negative traits with dark-skinned Blacks. According to Ronald Jackson, Chang In Shin, and Keith Wilson (2000), through acknowledging the superiority and privilege of Whites in U.S. society, people of color can come to internalize their status as inferior and believe White interaction partners regard them as mediocre, unprivileged, and subordinate. While Whites may expect the privileges of being White, some may feel that they are being targeted as the "evil nemesis" when they do not feel personally responsible for racism (R. L. Jackson & Heckman, 2002).

It's important to note that both Whites and people of color are participants in this process. All people must challenge negative perceptions of race. Scholars such as McPhail (2002) argue that such perceptions must be engaged openly to remedy the communication patterns between racial groups.

Critics of the concept of White privilege point out that there is a wide diversity of peoples identified as White and argue that the concept ignores differences among White microcultures. Other critics reference intersectionality to explain that we have overlapping social identities of gender, race, and social class, among others, and can be privileged in some ways and not privileged in others.

<u>Resources used in this lesson</u>

1- Fred. E, Jandt. (2021). An introduction to Intercultural Communication: Identities in a global community. TENTH EDITION. SAGE Publishing- California State University, San Bernardino.

2- All pictures are borrowed from the above-mentioned sources (Google).