COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES

Have they understood what is at stake? Why do they avoid answering the question? Why are they being aloof and distant? In cross-cultural interactions, such questions can easily come to the fore. The usual challenges of interviews are compounded by the need to decipher what an interviewee’s actions reflect, deceit, or a culturally influenced way of interacting?

So, why can interacting across cultures end in misunderstanding? The answer stems from the fact that humans rely on a set of internal norms and expectations to guide their actions. These develop over childhood and are refined by daily experiences. As a consequence, they are different for each one of us. Differences in beliefs about how to interact with authority, in how to express emotions and thoughts, in how we respond to persuasion, in how we take turns and follow the ‘etiquette’ of interaction, and even in what we understand by ‘crime’ and ‘lying’. These examples just scratch the surface.

Ordinarily, such norms simplify interaction by allowing us to anticipate the other person’s behaviour. In cross-cultural interactions, the norms of one person are often not those underpinning the behaviour of their counterpart. The result is that norms mislead how the other person’s behaviour is understood.

CROSS-CULTURAL JUDGMENTS ABOUT DECEPTION

If you need convincing that cross-cultural interactions carry their own challenges, then consider research on the age-old task of spotting a liar. Most of us are poor at spotting liars, and we get worse when those we are judging have a different cultural background. In 1990, Charles Bond and his colleagues asked Jordanian and US undergraduate students to judge the genuine and fabricated statements of their peers. The students identified deceit with a better-than-chance accuracy rate for within-culture judgements, but rates little better than chance when judging across cultures. Interestingly, these students report basing their judgements, in part, on how they feel others from their culture would react. They are not therefore relying on some absolute criteria of what liars do. Rather, they are relying on culturally determined cues, apparently unaware that these may not remain valid across cultures.

So why does the accuracy of our judgements decrease across cultures? One explanation is known as the expectancy violation model. It proposes that people infer deception when a communicator violates what the observer anticipates seeing and hearing. They seek a plausible explanation for the behaviour and, in the absence of other information, that plausible explanation becomes “this person is lying.” For example, in one study, observers perceived actors who perform strange and unexpected behaviours (e.g., head tilting and staring) as more dishonest than those who did not perform such behaviours. This was true regardless of whether the actor was telling the truth or lying.

This pattern of performance has been found time and time again. American, Indian, Jordanian, Korean and Spanish students have all shown above-chance accuracy rates for within-culture judgements, but rates little better than chance when judging across cultures. Interestingly, these students report basing their judgements, in part, on how they feel others from their culture would react. They are not therefore relying on some absolute criteria of what liars do. Rather, they are relying on culturally determined cues, apparently unaware that these may not remain valid across cultures.

A second approach is to substitute making prescriptive suggestions with a descriptive account that highlights the kinds of issues that arise. In this top-down approach, the focus is on providing investigators with an understanding of why differences are observed, rather than encouraging them to memorise a range of cultural differences. A number of researchers have shown that this kind of exposure to characteristic problems improves cross-cultural sensemaking.

Chart 1 gives an example of a top-down approach. In Chart 1, the top half — Communication Features — describes issues that have been shown to result in misunderstandings. The bottom half — Learning points — summarises a point worth remembering. The Chart is structured around four kinds of dialogue: orientation, which seeks to establish the nature of the engagement, relational, which seeks to manage the interpersonal dynamic (e.g., attempts to put them at ease); problem-solving, which seeks to develop acceptable solutions or exchange information; and resolution, which occurs as interactions, or particular parts of dialogue, conclude.

ORIENTATION DIALOGUE

Orientation dialogue dominates early stages of interaction. An orientation may be as short as a few sentences to initiate dialogue, such as occurs during an airport screening. Or, it may take longer as parties define their relationship and the way forward, such as occurs within a police interview.

Two factors that often raise confusion during this time are small talk and role differences. Small talk serves a number of purposes, which are often described as ‘ticking over’ behaviours. In investigative contexts, small talk helps to get the interaction going with the interviewee.
However, cultures differ in their use of small talk. Do you remember the children's book A Bear Called Paddington? When it was translated for the German market, entire sequences were cut from the story to remove the characteristic use of small talk in the German language. This version of the story can read as cold and abrupt to those accustomed to small talk. Similarly, it is easy to lose appreciation for interactions that are seen as rude or distant; for example, avoiding eye contact and giving short answers, as being rude or unforthcoming. That's not always a correct interpretation of their behaviour.

The status of an interviewer and how she or he acts towards the interviewee can also dramatically shape the way an interaction unfolds. Although role effects are relevant to all stages of an interaction, they are critical during orientation because roles are determined at this stage. In law enforcement settings, the aspect of role that tends to dominate is power. For example, many East-Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese) are sensitive to hierarchy and position, and interviewees from these cultures are likely to be respectful of an investigator who presents with authority. While this can be useful, it can also be detrimental when the interviewee's reaction to authority is to show deference by being silent. In contrast, many with Middle-Eastern cultural backgrounds will resist but mistrust authority. This can manifest as an antagonistic interpersonal style, which heightens tension and may inappropriately raise an interviewee's suspicions.

A related influence of role on cross-cultural interactions concerns memory. Studies show that we are more likely to conform to a story presented to us by someone perceived as high-powered compared to someone perceived as low-powered, and this effect is more pronounced in stressful contexts. This is perhaps why, in some cross-cultural interactions, investigators are confronted with agreement to everything that they say. The interviewee's answers relate to what she or he thinks the investigator wants to hear, rather than what is in fact true.

**RELATIONAL DIALOGUE**

Relational dialogue refers to interaction that is focused on issues such as personal reputation, identity, and social belonging. It is more pronounced in stressful contexts. This is perhaps why, in some cross-cultural interactions, investigators are confronted with agreement to everything that they say. The interviewee's answers relate to what she or he thinks the investigator wants to hear, rather than what is in fact true.

When an issue cannot be resolved and interaction reaches an impasse, it is sometimes necessary to lay down an ultimatum. An interviewee may suggest, for example, that it is impossible to move forward before a particular piece of evidence is available (e.g., "there is little I can do until... "). While investigators know that it is best to avoid ultimatums, some recent research suggests some intriguing cultural differences in the way people respond to such requests. Dutch suspects, for example, were more likely to engage in this way than their American counterparts.

In contrast, other cultures engage in a more participatory form of interaction, suggesting a common experience or perspective on an issue. This ‘contextualisation’ can overwhelm those unaccustomed to it. For example, speakers of English typically tell stories through a short ‘scene setting’ and a ‘linear’ account of the story’s main events. By contrast, other cultures place on different forms of communication.

A second example of relational misunderstanding concerns the use of empathy. Investigators often express empathy to get ‘on side’ and gain the trust of another. They present a willingness to listen to someone and express sympathy for their situation, or suggest a common experience or perspective on an issue.

When this approach is used in interactions with those from cultures in which social group is valued (e.g., as is typical of people from China, Kurdistan, and Suriname), the reaction is surprise, rather than interest. It can be that, in these interactions, empathy elicits a negative response. Although the reason for this is not clear-cut, the current thinking is that it has to do with ‘face’ or ‘honour’, which are dominant within these cultures. Empathy in situations where empathy is not particularly warranted may be perceived as undermining face, and as a challenge rather than an attempt at increasing affiliation.

**RESOLUTION DIALOGUE**

The final phase in Chart 1 concerns the closing stages of interaction, where decisions are made and resolutions achieved.

While the closure of an interaction can emerge naturally out of people's personal orientation, in cross-cultural interactions, it is often the case that each party has a different understanding of what has been agreed. For example, research suggests that many police detectives are unsure about what to do when a suspect shows signs of resistance, and that they often interpret the resistance as an indication of guilt. Yet, suspects may show resistance for a number of reasons, even when they are not guilty. They may not trust the interviewee or the investigator, or they may be concerned about incriminating themselves in the enquiry. This is why current interview training focuses less on how to obtain a confession and more on how to gather information about the circumstances surrounding the time in question.

A second issue that is often prominent at the end of interactions, though clearly important throughout, is ‘face’. Face is an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction. For some cultures ‘face’ is a paramount motivation, to the extent that people will be willing to provide false information, or not reveal true information, if doing so saves personal face or if the face of the interviewee (e.g., if the investigator has become a suspect). An often-used example of this is when business negotiations end in a ‘yes’ but the deal falls through.

In this context, the ‘yes’ is used to not embarrass the businessman at the end of the meeting, rather than an indication of agreement to the proposed deal. It is perhaps inevitable that such behaviour will be seen as deliberate evasion by some cultures, although the motivation behind the message is more complex than it may first appear.

One interesting consequence of examining cross-cultural interactions using the four kinds of dialogue outlined in Chart 1 is that it becomes apparent how misunderstandings can accumulate over time. Arguably, out of the phases, it is the early orientation and relational aspects of dialogue that are most vulnerable to misunderstanding. If people struggle over problem-solving aspects of interaction, there is a good chance that misunderstandings will surface during their discussion. In contrast, issues relating to orientation and role may be difficult to spot, and even harder to undo as an interaction unfolds.

Being aware of such issues is the first step to avoiding cultural misunderstandings.