Paper citation:

Abstract:
Communication in its simplest form refers to the ongoing process of sharing and understanding meaning (→ Communication: Definitions and Concepts). Much of a problematic intercultural communication stems from different ways that message is composed, transmitted, and interpreted. Human beings depend on combinations of a variety of philosophical, social psychological and institutional standards or criteria of conduct to arrive at reasonable, appropriate, and meaningful modes of communication. Asia is very heterogeneous. Each Asian culture has its unique philosophical traditions, ethics, and morals for appropriate social behaviors and conducts, Confucianism, however, is one of the most prevalent practices in Asian cultures. Although communication is unique within each Asian culture, systematic similarities in communication (e.g., indirect, implicit, polite and formal communication) have been observed across the Asian cultures (Gao, Ting-Toomey, & Gudykunst 1996).

Human communication modes (→Communicator Style) can be understood from multiple perspectives. The purpose of this article is to explore this very phenomenon by examining the current literature from Asian perspectives (→ Communication as an Academic Field: East Asia). Specifically, this entry discusses certain Asian communication modes, their underlying core concepts, and the overarching philosophical roots among Asian cultures.

SEE ALSO: Communication: Definitions and Concepts; Communicator Style; Communication as an Academic Field: East Asia; Communication Modes: Western; Strategic Communication; Cultural Patterns and Communication.

KEY WORDS: Confucianism; Collectivism; Individualism, Power Distance; Harmony; Hierarchy; High-Context and Low-Context Communication; Indirect and Implicit Communication; Polite and Formal Communication; Assertiveness.

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Asian Communication Modes

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Core Principles in Confucianism: Harmony and Hierarchy

Asian society has been strongly influenced by an ancient Chinese sage, Confucius, who lived about 2,500 years ago, before Greek philosopher Socrates. Confucianism encompasses sets of principles and rules regulating social behaviors and relationships, among which *ren* (humanism), *yi* (righteousness), *li* (courtesy) and *shu* (forgiveness) are emphasized in dealing with the five cardinal relationships (i.e., father and son, emperor and minister, husband and wife, among brothers and friends) (Gabrenya & Hwang1996). Confucius propagates that things and persons should fall into prescribed power hierarchies and responsibilities so that individuals can relate to each other in a supportive and harmonious manner. Confucianism was developed in a time of chaos in China. In `the process of human civilization,` its influence has spread to the neighboring Asian countries of China and elsewhere in Asia. The effort to promote Confucian values in Asian societies is evident in media representation, school teaching, and government policies. Particularly, some major Confucian values, such as `interpersonal harmony, relational hierarchy, and traditional conservatism, are considered Asian, for they are generally emphasized more in the East than in other parts of the world`. Hence, many scholars have identified Asian societies as collectivistic rooted in Confucianism (e.g., Hofstede 2001).

Indirect and Implicit Communication

As one of the classical writers on communication and culture, Hall (1976) differentiated cultures on a continuum specified by how much information is communicated and/or implied by the communication context per se, regardless of the specific words that are spoken. In Hall's view, on the high end of the continuum are high-context cultures where contextual messages other than the explicit verbal codes are emphasized. Unsurprisingly, high-context messages can be implicit, ambiguous, and indirect. On the lower end of the continuum locates low-context cultures where the explicit and direct verbal codes are emphasized. The high-context communication might involve managing strategic ambiguity, and

sometimes "beating around the bushes", thus seemingly little intended meaning is provided in the explicit verbal form. Grice's (1975) conversation maxims illustrate the ideal conversation styles preferred in low-context cultures, calling on communicators to give sufficient and relevant information and evidence in conversations and to avoid ambiguity, excessive verbosity, disorganization, and obscure expressions (→ Communication Modes, Western).

In line with the broader descriptions of Hall's high context cultural trait where the contextual cues and nonverbal communication (→Nonverbal Communication and Culture) are emphasized more than the sheer verbal codes, indirect/implicit communication is a case in point to illustrate how communication is carried out in Asian cultures. By its discursive expression, indirect communication refers to a communicative practice that is shared in many Asian cultures where communicators express meaning (esp. the intended) through using implicit, some times ambiguous, and unassertive messages. For example, in the Chinese cultural context, indirect/implicit communication is most exercised in expressing feelings and emotions, initial encounters, public settings, imposing on others, situations where others' face or image needs to be protected, self-enhancing situations, and dealing with sensitive people and topics (Gao 2006). Assertive verbal skills in public speaking and debate are promoted and evaluated positively in Western societies, such as the United States; however, those who have a sharp tongue in Asian societies are perceived more negatively as causing trouble, disruptive, self-centered, and having less knowledge than those who are relatively reticent. In other words, taciturnity is encouraged. When verbal messages are necessary, they are usually strategically managed and unassertively presented, especially in expressing discontentment so that the escalation of conflict can be avoided (→ Strategic Communication).

The long Confucian tradition encourages individuals to conduct "mind to mind" communication (Tsujimura 1987), involving communicating meanings through the physical setting, the communication situation, the relational and psychological temperament of the communicators, the shared beliefs, values, and norms, etc.. Phrases like *ishin-denshinin* in the Japanese culture and *i-shim jun-sim* in the Korean culture, *hanxu* in the Chinese culture all demonstrate the importance of nonverbal communication and strategic ambiguity (Gao et al. 1996; Tsujimura 1987; Yum 1987). Consistent with this perspective, previous cross-cultural studies examining assertiveness and argumentativeness have revealed that Asians are less assertive than Westerners (Kim 2002). To a large degree, indirect communication aims to promote and cultivate modesty, humility, and harmonious relations with others. In addition, certain external variables have contributed to the practice of indirect communication. Tsujimura (1987) argues that linguistic and ethnic homogeneity enables people in Asian cultures to understand the unspoken subtleties and understatements of a message, presumed to be part of the normative repertoire of social knowledge. On the other hand, cultural and linguistic diversity in the United States would make indirect communication inefficient and problematic.

A recent discussion in an American college classroom over a conversation dialogue between an American student and a Malaysian student indirectly asking for a favor revealed several critical points. Some American students read the dialogue several times and still did not know exactly for what the

Malaysian student was asking. Those who understood the request perceived the Malaysian student as sneaky and manipulative. Some thought that the Malaysian student had a language proficiency problem. Two Asian students in the classroom were frustrated with the American students' lack of sensitivity in reading between lines. This example demonstrates that the use of an indirect communication style in intercultural communication between persons from Asia and Western societies can be frustrating for both parties.

Polite and Formal Communication

Cultural systems mold individuals' communication behaviors through influencing individuals' self-construal (Kim 2002). Asian communication is very affectively based, other-centered, and ingroup-oriented. Unlike the Western societies where the independent self (i.e., viewing individuals as autonomous beings with unique personalities, emotions and motivations) is most valued, the interdependent self (i.e., viewing individuals as connected to multi-layers of relationships with others) is most emphasized in Asian societies (→ Cultural Patterns and Communication). Self in Asian cultures is defined by a person's surrounding relations derived from kinship networks. An Asian person's self-concept and self esteem are dependent on how the person is considered or perceived by others. To have a positive sense of self is to be able to relate to others in ways sensitive to cultural values (e.g., filial piety), norms and role expectations. Undoubtedly, Western self-esteem also depends on how the person is considered by others, however, Asians' emotional attachment to the concept of others is relatively much stronger than that of the Westerners.

In Asian societies, maintaining good relations with others, being able to work in teams and having a supportive social network project positive self images as being amicable, likeable, and capable. That said, the cultivation of such social relationships involves extending politeness and formality to others, including supporting others' face through abiding by the spoken and unspoken rules and norms. Using formal and appropriate forms of address, praising others, being friendly, patient and respectful, knowing one's limit, expressing concern, showing care, warmth, and gratitude, and displaying modesty and humility are all specific examples of politeness. In general, an Asian communicator extends a great deal of sensitivity to protect the other party's positive image or face in the communication process in order not to gain one's own face. Hence, from early childhood, individuals in Asian societies are educated to respect established relational and social hierarchies and to give an abundance of consideration to others.

As hierarchy permeates every corner of Asian societies, Asian communication undoubtedly is characterized by its politeness and formality. Bearing an Asian cultural background and teaching in the United States, I am frequently amazed by the different levels of politeness and formality extended by students in their e-mails. A typical e-mail from an Asian international student who are interested in enrolling a class that is full would start with a very formal address (e.g., Dear Professor or Dr.), followed by a well structured self-introduction and reasons for the request. Sincerely and yours truly always appear at the end of the message. A typical e-mail from an American student would be very informal.

American students frequently write e-mails without any forms of address and often leaving no name at the end of the message.

In explaining motivational forces of the Asian communication styles, which are under the umbrella of Hall's theoretical framework of high context and low context communication, Confucianism has always been cited as the overarching philosophical root while collectivism and high power distance are attributed as the shared Asian cultural traits (Hofstede 2001). Cultural level analysis (e.g., accounts of Asian communication styles tend to paint all Asians with the same broad brush as collectivistic and thus reserved, indirect) has enhanced our understanding of the Asian communication styles and their motivational forces. However, recent research using individual level analysis calls attention to the complexity and increasing heterogeneity of Asian communication styles, taking into account important impacts of cultural change, especially within younger, more educated, and urban segments of the Asian societies (e.g., Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert 2005).

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