

Culture, Identity, and Intercultural Communication

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BCSC 400: Intercultural Communication

Word Count: 1126

Culture and identity are both interrelated and interdependent; one is not without the other. Culture and identity both strongly shape intercultural communications and perceptions of other cultures. Satoshi Ishii's three-layered model of culture, as conceptualized by Miike (2015), describes culture as made up of material, behavioural, and mental layers (p. 28). These layers of culture not only help people to conceptualize one's own identity, but also influence their perception of the cultures and identities around them and therefore affect the manner in which they engage in intercultural communication. The material layer of culture is visible and obvious and can be the source of either intercultural acceptance or intercultural discrimination depending the intercultural language that one chooses to use. Although the behavioural layer *reflects* collective cultural values, verbal and nonverbal behaviours are also dictated by the individual. The mental layer of culture and cultural identity not only governs both the behavioural and material layers, but can also be reflective of both collective and individual values and beliefs, therefore greatly affecting intercultural relations as influenced by personal worldview.

Ishii's outermost layer of culture, the material layer, represents the tangible, visible aspects of culture that are the most obvious to the outside world (Miike, 2015, p. 28). As discussed by Dr. MacPhearson, despite some scholars arguing that 'material level' acceptance of other cultures, such as acceptance of fashion or food, will not have a long term or deep effect on intercultural acceptance (Personal communication, 2021). The material layer of culture, although it may not appear this way, not only affects one's identity, but also affects one's perceptions of other cultures around them. As Braithwaite and Braithwaite (2015) discuss, when someone belongs to a specific culture due to a material aspect of their life, such as being disabled, they must define themselves as part of this culture. The authors discuss that when describing ourselves or others, "the words we use influence our perception of others, and theirs of us"

(2015, p. 169). In speaking with a person with a handicapping condition, the researchers also discovered that “the goal is to speak in ways that emphasize the *person*, rather than the disability” (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015, p. 169). Because this material layer of culture is often the most conspicuous, it does become a large part of one’s personal identity and is often a major indicator of their membership in certain cultures or subcultures (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2015). However, it is important that the intercultural rhetoric between these materially different cultures ensures that one’s personal identity comes first, and their material condition comes second. Ishii’s material layer of culture can not only influence one’s perception of self and others but also affects the next layer, the behavioural aspect of culture.

The next layer of culture that Miike discusses when referencing Ishii’s 1997 model is the behavioural layer (2015). This behavioural layer consists of “verbal and nonverbal behaviours as symbols” which reflect the culture’s norms and values (Miike, 2015, p. 28). These behaviours, although reflective of the values upheld by the culture as a collective group, also manifest aspects of one’s individual beliefs or ethics. Saint-Jacques discusses that Hofstede’s “rigid dichotomy” of individualism versus collectivism is not accurate and is not widely accepted as such (2015, p.18). Instead, the concept of ‘individual-collectivism’ is proposed which “can celebrate cultural diversity in thought and action... while maintaining core values related to the importance of the group” (Saint-Jacques, 2015, p. 21). Because culture is a “live experience,” there is an ever-changing negotiation between the individual and the collective that helps one to create and maintain a sense of identity while also preserving their membership in a specific culture (Saint-Jacques, 2015, p. 19). This negotiation manifests itself within the behavioural verbal and nonverbal intercultural communications that members of different cultures engage in. Chen discusses this behavioural layer of culture by asserting that “the cultural experience of the

group is a bounded symbolic whole covering with a range of meanings for the development of norms and values that in turn provide a collective sense of identity” (2015, p. 63). Although this collective sense of identity often influences the *reasoning* behind one’s actions, these actions are often still one’s individual choice.

The last and final layer of Ishii’s cultural model that Miike discusses is the mental layer (2015, p. 28). This mental layer essentially reflects the “cultural worldview” that is upheld and therefore “functions in the form of values, beliefs, and attitudes” (p. 28). This layer acts as the control center of culture and cultural identity as it both affects and regulates both the behavioural and material layers (Miike, 2015). Although the mental layer of culture is the most personal layer of identity, it is also the most reflective of collective cultural values; one’s worldview is created in a collective context and can either be maintained or adjusted in an individual context. Within intercultural communications, it is essential that people do not perceive surrounding cultures through the lens of their own mental layer of culture – rather than simply learning *about* other cultures, it is essential that we also learn *from* other cultures in order to eradicate ethnocentrism and bias, degrading assumptions regarding other cultures (2015, p. 29). This mental layer of culture and cultural identity can become an issue when one is ignorant of surrounding cultural diversity: “ignorance of cultural diversity, not cultural diversity itself, is a source of disharmony and conflict” (Miike, 2015, p. 27). Therefore, if people within cultures are willing to both learn about and from other cultures, their personal identity and worldview will reflect humility, teachability, and cultural acceptance. Consequently, these people will be able to maintain positive, constructive intercultural communications with people of surrounding cultures.

Miike’s discussion of Ishii’s three-layered model frames culture as a function of a material layer, a behavioural layer, and a mental layer. Each of these layers plays an important

role in the formation of one's personal and cultural identities and helps regulate the manner in which they engage in intercultural communication and perceive other cultures. A flowing negotiation of individual and collective values influence one's identity on the material, behavioural, and mental levels of culture. Although the mental layer dictates both the behavioural and material layers, each layer influences one's intercultural communication in important and unique ways. The material layer, as the most conspicuous layer of culture, maintains conversations and interactions driven by visible physical characteristics and the intercultural barriers that ensue. Verbal and nonverbal conduct is guided by the behavioural layer of culture and identity and emphasizes the importance of language and word choice in intercultural communications. One's worldview, or their mental layer of culture, dictates their perception of the cultures around them and therefore controls one's own relational cultural identity and their intercultural communication as a whole.

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