

Review

Communicating Across Cultures

Stella Ting-Toomey

The Guilford Press, 1999.

Reviewed by Torin Ruark

Published in Global Missiology, Review & Preview, July 2010, www.globalmissiology.org

Communicating Across Cultures by Stella Ting-Toomey is a foundational book about mindful intercultural communication through the identity negotiation theory. The book applies this theory to cross-cultural communication, conflict resolution, and cultural adaptation. Before Ting-Toomey delves into applying the theory, she lays the foundation by defining culture, its purpose, and some key assumptions regarding the colliding of different cultures. I found this very helpful in codifying concepts that I had felt or was aware of but couldn't describe, as well as shedding light on what is happening in intercultural settings.

First, Ting-Toomey defines culture as “a diverse pool of knowledge, shared realities, and clustered norms that constitute the learned systems of meanings in a particular society.” These systems are “transmitted through everyday interactions among members of the cultural group and from one generation to the next” for the purpose of facilitating “members’ capacity to survive and adapt to their external environment” (p. 9). One of Ting-Toomey’s key concepts is the fact that individuals of all cultures feel a need for identity, inclusion, boundary regulation, adaptation, and communication coordination and culture is the expression of the desire to meet those needs (p. 15). The challenge of cross-cultural communication is ensuring that all parties feel their needs are being met through the communication process.

There are five assumptions laid out in this book about the nature of intercultural communication:

1) *it involves varying degrees of cultural group membership differences.*

The salience of membership varies with individuals and with specific values.

2) *It involves the simultaneous encoding and decoding of verbal and nonverbal messages in the exchange process.*

This is a technical way of saying that there is constant message sending and message receiving. The message that is coded and sent, however, is not always decoded to have the same meaning or significance.

3) *Many intercultural encounters involve well-meaning clashes.*

In other words, we seek to behave properly, and do so according to our own culture, but this is often misinterpreted according to the cultural norms of the dissimilar culture.

4) *Intercultural communication always takes place in a context.*

This makes cross-cultural communication very fluid and a “moving target” as two situations are never the same.

5) *Intercultural communication always takes place in embedded systems.*

This means that there are a whole set of ingredients that make up the system and influence each other at the same time (p.16-17).

I really found the concept of mindful intercultural communication to be helpful. Ting-Toomey writes “mindfulness means the readiness to shift one’s frame of reference, the motivation to use new categories to understand cultural or ethnic differences, and the preparedness to experiment with creative avenues of decision making and problem solving (p. 46). It also suggests the fact that we are intentional about seeking the true meaning of what is being communicated, learning the norms of our counterpart, and seeking to adapt to those norms. This seems like a basic concept, yet I’m not sure I’m always as intentional about discovering cultural cues as I should be. This, I think, is the difference between the “conscious incompetence stage” and the “conscious competence stage” (p. 52).

The identity negotiation theory posits that intercultural encounters are driven by the security or vulnerability of one's identity (p. 26). Our identity, or self-image, is influenced and formed by our culture and through interaction with those of our own culture. As a result, our self-image is affirmed and feels safest when we are communicating with those with whom we are familiar. Unfamiliar situations and differing communication styles can create a crisis by which one does not feel the identity security, inclusion, boundary regulation, adaptation, and communication coordination that is desired. Thus, one's strategies naturally turn toward attaining these perceived needs.

Ting-Toomey devoted a great deal of the book to discussing differing broad cultural values that exist in many cultures. I found her discussion on individual vs. collective cultures and low context/direct vs. high context/indirect communication to be the most helpful. Recently, I have had some issues that need dealing with between leadership in the US and Haitian leadership as it relates to teams visiting Haiti. While I am limited to email as the mode of communication, I tried to keep the communication style of the email as indirect as possible by using the passive voice. One of my main strategies was to replace "you" and "I" statements with "us" and "we." My goal in doing this was to maintain the security and self-image of my counterpart in Haiti so as to keep him from becoming defensive or resistant to my suggestions.