

Multicultural communication – a sought-after soft-skill in the XXI century?

An introduction to the topic and an overview of the multicultural communication obstacles.

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Summary: 1. Introduction – 2. Communication – art or science? – 3. Culture and communication, communication and culture. – 4. Do our cultural backgrounds make it harder to communicate? – Overview of the cultural obstacles in the communication process. – 5. Conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Multicultural communication skills are crucial. As the world is becoming a smaller and smaller place, differences that occur on both our professional and personal paths are increasingly bigger and more noticeable. While working and living across nations and cultures, the comprehension and awareness of the intercultural competency is the survival issue. Very much needed to thrive. The importance of cultural competency is becoming more recognized and materials helping to develop such are required.¹ On many occasions, the cultural communication skill is enumerated as one of most needed to become a global leader, succeed in professional live or develop generally.

The main goal of the chapter is to provide an introduction to the very broad topic and familiarize addressees with key concepts. As such, its character is of the popular science. At the same time, the chapter is of the pragmatic nature, striving to offer some practical guidelines and instruction. It is authors' intention to balance presentation of basic theory needed to understand core concepts of the topic with introduction of tools enhancing the effectiveness of the intercultural communication that could be applied immediately after reading the paper.

Having in mind the above explained nature and goals of the chapter, the authors decided to implement the following structure of the article. In the first two subchapters, the paper focuses on the definitions, context, components and intricacies of respectively the concepts of communication and culture. The content includes the authors' intakes on the essentials of the concepts and is limited in scope by the mentioned character of the paper. Throughout these subchapters the following questions as are addressed: "What are communication and culture? When does the communication process occur? What role does culture play in the communication process? How communication and culture affect one another?" Subchapter three, being the most extensive one, provides a brief introduction to a concept of the intercultural communication obstacles. Such is followed by a differentiation between linguistic and non-linguistic based obstacles (the differentiation being artificial in nature is introduced simply for the purpose of easier comprehension of the idea). In the final subchapter, in order to enhance the practical application of the paper, in each of above-mention categories of the obstacles, the authors include a non-exhaustive list of the obstacles, followed by the tools and techniques instrumental in overcoming such.

¹ Good example of such recognition is a survey conducted for the purpose of the Project. To see the outcomes, of the survey go to: <http://skills.turiba.lv/files/SOFT%20SKILLS%20SURVEY%20REPORT.pdf>

The chapter, while it contemplates theoretical concepts developed in existing literature, is aimed at providing a frame of reference for individuals and groups, students and professionals, with regard to any multi-cultural situations they will participate in. It is for people who seek to understand and to be understood others. Certainly, a deeper understanding of communication process, culture, links between them and available communication tools help in enhancing the effectiveness of multicultural communication.

2. COMMUNICATION – ART OR SCIENCE?

Communication is difficult. Most people make a mistake by assuming that since we all communicate on a daily basis, almost constantly, we all have the skill mastered. To quote business author Brian Tracy “Communication is a skill that you can learn. It’s like riding a bicycle or typing. If you’re willing to work at it, you can rapidly improve the quality of every part of your life.”²

Before the reader delves into various deliberations on an effective multicultural communication, it is crucial to define what communication actually is. There is more than a dozen definitions of communication focusing on various elements of the phenomena³, as well as multiple communication theories created for the purposes of categorization and easier comprehension of this complex process.⁴ Irrelevant of whether particular definitions bring more focus to the participants, the goal of communication or the mechanisms utilized to make the communication process effective, the focal point is the fact that communication is essentially a process of sending a message (conveying a meaning) from one entity to another to receive feedback.⁵ There is also no unanimity whatsoever in enumerating elements of a process of communication.⁶ For the purposes of this chapter the authors choose to indicate the following elements involved: a sender, a message, a medium and a channel, a receiver, a response and a feedback. Therefore, to simplify, the communication process consists of the following actions: sender has an idea and intention to send a message,

² Gallo, C. (2016, August 9), *Richard Branson: “Communication Is The Most Important Skill Any Leader Can Possess.”* Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminnegallo/2015/07/07/richard-branson-communication-is-the-most-important-skill-any-leader-can-possess/?sh=16695fe52e8a>. Retrieved 26.11.2020.

³ To give an example of a few scholar definitions John Adair understood communication as ‘*the ability of one person to make contact with another and make himself or herself understood*’. Whereas Allen Louis defined that ‘*communication is the sum of all the things one person does; when he wants to create understanding in the mind of another. It involves a systematic and continuous process of telling, listening and understanding*’, when Peter Little emphasized that ‘*communication is a process by which information is transmitted between individuals and/or organizations so that an understanding response results*’ or William Newman and Charles Summer: said that ‘*Communication is an exchange of ideas, facts, opinions or emotions of two or more persons*’. The above-mentioned illustrate their various focus in the definition that is from the participants (interlocutors) to the goal of communication or the mechanisms utilized to make the communication process more effective. Examples of definitions can be found i.a.: R. (2020, May 29), *What is Communication? Definition, Concept, Process, & Types*. ReadingJunction: <https://readingjunction.com/communication-definition-concept-process-types/> Retrieved: 19.09.2020

⁴ Among noted theorists of such are: Aristotle, Lasswell, Shannon, Weaver, McLuhan, MacLean, Rileys, Westley, Gerbner, Rothstein, Schramm, Berlo, Osgood, Johnson or Cherry. To illustrate the manifold of theories and models one can refer to a number of linear (e.g. Aristotle model of communication) and non-linear models of communication (such as sadharanikaran model of communication).

⁵ The two-way traffic emphasized by receiving feedback tends to align more with the non-linear models of communication – unidirectional in nature, with a focus on mutual understanding of both sender and receiver. See also: Adhikary, N. M. (1970). *The Sadharanikaran Model and Aristotle’s Model of Communication: A Comparative Study*. Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 2(1), 268–289. <https://doi.org/10.3126/bodhi.v2i1.2877>.

⁶ *Inter alia* the previously mentioned Sadharanikaran model consists of nine elements, whereas the Aristotle model of communication features five elements.

then encoding of the message occurs, after that the message goes through channel process, and next the receiver decodes the message and finally discerns, followed by their response.⁷

Communication channels form the basis to differentiate between two main types of communication: verbal and non-verbal. In a verbal communication one uses language and words to pass the intended message. A non-verbal communication is a process of sending information in wordless messages such as gestures, body language, symbols and expressions. As long as in most situations communication occurs simultaneously via both channels, research confirms that majority of the communication is non-verbal.⁸

A successful communication is but merely limited to an exchange of information. What is deemed to be an effective communication is about understanding emotions and intentions behind the information. Understanding such is necessary to gain the full meaning behind the messages received and express fully those one sends. To communicate effectively one needs to be aware of all the elements that influence the message they intend to convey (both verbal and non-verbal). Therefore, summing up the recipe for good communication is: common communication environment, the sender's and the receiver's mutual cooperation, selection of an appropriate channel, encoding and decoding of the message in a correct way (effective overcoming of communication obstacles), as well as a receipt of the desired response and feedback.

While the authors will not in detail describe the enumerated components of the communication process, it is in their opinion that communication in its' nature is simply a process of an intentional interaction between at least two people happening in a particular reality – context and culture – aimed at passing the message from one person to the other to elicit the response.

The intercultural communication, as name indicates, emphasizes communication and culture. Having understood what communication is, the next natural step is to cast some light on the concept of culture and its links with communication.

3. CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

There is no one unanimously agreed definition of the word (and more importantly the concept) of 'culture'. Some authors do not even believe that it is possible or useful to achieve such. Best example would be A. Lang's conclusion "that attempts at defining culture in a definite way are futile."⁹ The authors of this chapter share the view that the technical

⁷ For more information on the process of communication, coding and decoding messages see i.a.: Gruman, J., Schneider, F. & Coutts, L. (Eds.) (2017), *Applied social psychology Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc* DOI: 10.4135/9781071800591.

⁸ The authors, nonetheless, do not intend to indicate any numbers or proportion. Whether it be two thirds of all communications as stated by some authors (see: Hogan, K.; Stubbs, R. (2003). *Can't Get Through: 8 Barriers to Communication*. Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company. ISBN 978-1589800755, Burgoon, Judee K; Guerrero, Laura k; Floyd, Kory (2016), *Introduction to Nonverbal Communication*. Nonverbal communication. New York: Routledge. pp. 1–26. ISBN 978-0205525003 and other.) or the frequently-quoted 7% Rule according to which communication is only 7 percent verbal and 93 percent non-verbal, as referred to in a book published Albert Mehrabian in which he elaborated on research on non-verbal communication (see: Mehrabian, Albert (1981). *Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. ISBN 0-534-00910-7 and others). The explicit numbers are further argued with by i.a David Lapakko in: Lapakko, D. (2007), *Communication is 93% Nonverbal: An Urban Legend Proliferates*. *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal*, 34, 7-19 or by Philip Yaffe in: Philip Yaffe. 2011. *The 7% rule: fact, fiction, or misunderstanding*. *Ubiquity* 2011, October, Article 1 (October 2011), 5 pages. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2043155.2043156>. Despite disagreement about the exact numbers, researchers are unanimous in stating that communication is in majority a non-verbal process.

⁹ Lang, A. (1997), *Thinking Rich as Well as Simple: Boesch's Cultural Psychology in Semiotic Perspective*. *Culture & Psychology*, 3(3), 383–394; p.387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067x9733009>.

definition of the concept is not the most important and siding with one definitely does not fall within the scope of this paper.

Having said that, there are some things we can definitely say about culture. Firstly, it came a long way from its origins stemming from 'to cultivate' and its connection to agriculture, as well as its first known usage in connection to philosophy (Cicero's cultural *mentis*).¹⁰ Secondly, nowadays it is a polysemous.¹¹ Lastly, it plays an important role in a way we see the world around us.

Each of us is a part of different cultures (maybe to some extent we could even dare to state that one is a combination of multiple cultures) and at the same time no one is a perfect representation of any culture. Culture is something learnt and acquired. Transmitted from generation to generation. No one is born 'with' a culture and yet, everyone is born 'into' so many of them. Cultural groups can be based on numerous identities, such as: gender, race, nationality, religion, sex orientation, geography, social status, age - to name just a few. Such groups create their own specific systems of beliefs, values, customs, lifestyles, behaviours and perceptions.

What is important to be acknowledged for the purpose of this paper is that culture has (or should we rather say cultures have) a profound influence on the way we experience and perceive the world and people around us, as well as on how we express ourselves. One illustration of such was given by Debra Chopp "Our choice of words, our tone of voice, our proximity to another person when we speak to them are all influenced by the cultures in which we were raised. Culture also affects the attributions we make about others. If we experience someone as rude, it is (in part) because we have a culturally contingent understating of what it means to be polite."¹²

What cannot be overemphasized is how complex the concept of culture is and typically, how much we are only "scratching the surface" of it. The perfect illustration of such is a very well-known metaphor of the "culture as an iceberg".¹³

¹⁰Bagby, P. (2021), *Cicero, Tusculanae disputationes* 2, 5, 13 . Culture and History (Underlining ed.). University of California. p.114.

¹¹ An interesting overview of the definition and evolution of the concept is provided in Jahoda, G. (2012), *Critical reflections on some recent definitions of "culture"*. Culture & Psychology, 3(3), 289-303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X12446229>. Retrieved: 18.10.2020.

¹² Chopp, D. (2017), *Addressing Cultural Bias in the Legal Profession*. NYU Rev. of L. and Soc. Change 41, no. 3 (2017): 367-406. <https://repository.law.umich.edu/articles/1874/> Retrieved: 20.10.2020.

¹³ For more on the concept of culture as an iceberg which states that there is more than what we see on a first glance - which is merely a visible culture - and describes unseen culture and deep culture concepts go to e.g.: Hall, E. T. (1997). *Beyond Culture* by Edward T. Hall (1977-01-07). Anchor Books.

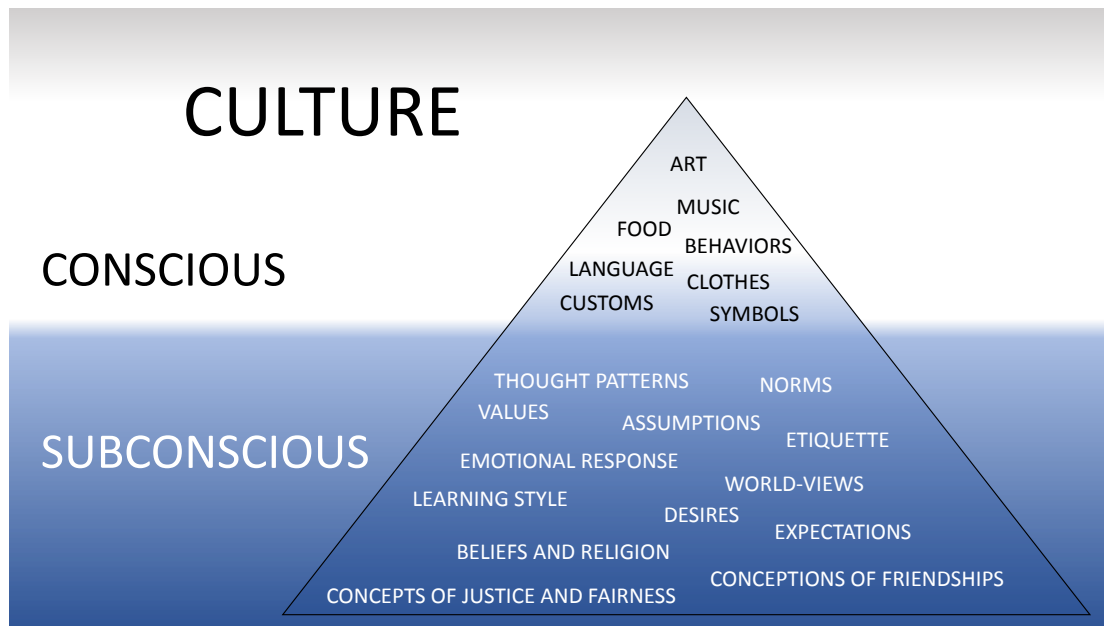


Figure 1: Culture as an iceberg.

On the other hand (what might be not that obvious), since communication (inter alia) is a process during which beliefs, views and values are discussed and shared between different members of the community, the communication is a prerequisite for shaping cultures (or, from a different perspective, one of the processes through which cultures are created and shared).¹⁴ To sum up, there is no culture without communication.

To quote Victor "Communication and culture are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, culture itself is one form of communication.... Consequently, the study of cultural differences and similarities so essential to international business success is largely inseparable from the study of international business communication."¹⁵

World is shrinking into a smaller place. More diversified and more global every day. Due to such factors as: migrations, internalization, global economy, world-wide media, social media and spreading internet accessibility, tourism, increasing role of huge, multi-billion-worth companies, having offices all over the world, both in our private and professional lives, we are offered a chance to (and/or are forced to) meet and deal with people coming from different backgrounds. We all have been communicating with people different from us our all life (after all, there are no two identical people). Those differences, however, are getting bigger, appear more often and become more apparent. Therefore, not only communication skills but also cultural competency is becoming increasingly crucial and useful - necessary to achieve our goals, become successful, but most importantly, desperately needed to better understand the reality we live in and people surrounding us. To see the bigger picture, if you will.

¹⁴ Knutson, K. (2014, June 11), *Definition of Culture* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CyrC9iLQF0s>

¹⁵ Victor, D. A. (1992), *International Business Communication* (1st Edition). Harpercollins College Div.

4. DO OUR CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS MAKE IT HARDER TO COMMUNICATE? – OVERVIEW OF THE CULTURAL OBSTACLES IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

4.1. Overview

Knowing what both communication and culture are, as well how they are inherently intertwined, this chapter of the paper aims at providing the overview of the obstacles that typically occur when dealing with communication in a multicultural context. Before doing so, it should be stressed that almost every conversation, discussion and other form of human interaction happens in an intercultural context. However, typically what is understood by the intercultural context is an interaction by individuals coming from significantly different backgrounds (regardless of whether it is due to their geographical origin, gender, system of beliefs, social status etc.). Of course, in general, the bigger the difference of the said backgrounds, the more influence culture has on the effectiveness of the communication process.

Moreover, the overview provided below is not a comprehensive list of the obstacles that may occur, but rather aims to bring awareness to some key impediments one can trip over while performing a multicultural ‘dance’. The paper is also strongly influenced but the personal experience of its authors gathered in the course of their careers¹⁶ as well as pragmatic aspirations of the paper being a brief introduction to a widely broad topic.

4.2. Intercultural language competency

4.2.1. Language as an obstacle in intercultural communication

In this subchapter, the paper focuses solely on one category of obstacles out of many. Namely, the obstacles occurring on a linguistic level.

Language is arguably the most essential and commonly used way of expression of humans. Whether in a context of a face-to-face conversation, emails exchange or phone conference, at the heart of communication in most scenarios lies the usage of some sort of language.

The number of languages present in the world is growing steadily. Just to give some example, the 1911 (11th) edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica,¹⁷ implies a figure somewhere around 1,000 languages existing worldwide, whereas currently Ethnologue (published by SIL International, being one of the generally authoritative lists) presents that right now there are more than 7000 languages spoken. What is worth mentioning, “meanwhile, just 23 languages account for more than half the world’s population.”¹⁸

With such a heterogenous world one can simply not expect to deal only with native speakers of their own language, having same accent, dialect, vocabulary choice, using same proverbs and metaphors, structure and style of communication. And although those remarks seem trivial in nature, speaking from experience, as non-native English speakers, in most intercultural scenarios, their role is prominent and understanding such is the first

¹⁶ The authors professionally teach negotiation and communication. Due to that, they have worked with people coming from several dozens of nationalities, also oversaw projects and negotiations processes between many nationals having place in almost all parts of the world.

¹⁷ Anderson, S. R. (2010), *How many languages are there in the world?* | Linguistic Society of America. Linguistic Society of America. <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/how-many-languages-are-there-world>

¹⁸ *How many languages are there in the world?* (2021, February 23). Ethnologue. <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages>

crucial barrier to overcome on the road to effective multicultural communication. That is why, the authors decided to devote one separate subchapter to the topic at hand.

When discussing language as a potential barrier in a communication process it is important to acknowledge that is not only about simple knowledge of vocabulary and grammar individuals involved in the communication possess. It is also about the pace, volume and accent. Our day-to-day language is filled with ambiguous words and phrases, professional jargon, abbreviations, colloquialism, references to current events, famous quotes, metaphors, phrasal verbs etc. Difficulties in effective communication occur primarily between individuals who are native-speakers of different languages, yet are not uncommon also between two parties originating from the same language region. There is no doubt 'language competency' in intercultural context is crucial for successful communication. At the same time in such a context, language competency should not be understood as simply a comprehensive knowledge and fluency in the language, but rather a competency to adjust usage of a language depending on a person one is communicating with. In most scenarios that might even be more difficult, as it is something one has to learn independently from simply learning the language.

To give some kind of illustration. Imagine a professional ballroom dancer. It is one thing to know all the steps and know how to dance their part. Completely another thing is to be able, depending on the level of skills the person they are paired with possesses, to adjust their choreography, not to start too advanced sequences, to lead in a distinctive and unequivocal way and not to use gestures and signals only they and their previous partner understand.

4.2.2. Overcoming language-based obstacles

Then, what can be done to increase chances that the above-mentioned dance performance will go smoothly? To increase 'intercultural language competency' so to speak. Below, the authors present their intake on most important tips.

First and foremost, one should internalize that in order to make sure misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misevaluation are avoided, it is needed to 'take the burden' of the communication on their shoulders. It is better to assume nothing is understandable unless proven otherwise (opposite to common assumption being that everything is understood until proven otherwise). Never equate poor foreign language competency with lack of knowledge or professional expertise in a field.

We would suggest starting with assessing the other person's competency of the language used in a communication process and then keeping verifying the evaluation on such throughout the entire process of communication. Accordingly, adjustments to the way intended message is being sent - should be made. What may be considered is to:

- slow down the pace of speaking, increase enunciation of the words, simplify the structure and vocabulary (i.e. avoid inversion, passive verbs, eloquent vocabulary or archaisms, compound sentences);

- not use colloquial language or very professional jargon, abbreviations, phrasal verbs, elaborate metaphors or any other words or expressions having ambiguous or figurative meaning;

- whenever using expression requiring the frame of reference, providing such a frame (it is fine if the other person stops the sender while explaining it due to the fact that such context is familiar to them);

- keep verifying if what is being said is understood properly and comprehensively – summarize, invite paraphrasing, ask questions if particular statement is received without any problems, use repetition when needed, encourage clarifying questions and interruptions when elaboration and more clarity is required;

- get comfortable with silence – do not feel a need to jump and fill it in as soon as the other person takes a bit of a break; also, considering taking more breaks as normally just to give some more time to gather thoughts; plan and schedule more time for the meeting;

- encourage speaking by the other person, be very careful not to embarrass them (i.e. do not excessively (if ever) correct their grammar if it is not needed for the sake of clarity);

- use visualizations, gestures (as long as they have similar meaning in their' culture), graphs, presentations, as well as tools introducing structure and enhancing clarity (such as: agenda, usage of the board, modules);

- send summary, minutes or notes after the meeting and seek confirmation.¹⁹

Equally important as making sure one is being understood properly is to ensure one's reception of the other person's message is undisturbed. Respectively, it is crucial to deploy the above-mentioned suggestions to the process of listening, as well as to introduce active listening techniques. The tools and exercises instrumental in developing such are provided in the article by Karin Sonnleitner and Verena Gschweidl "Conflict Diagnosis: How to deal with a conflict"²⁰ as well as in study materials available in project webpage <http://skills.turiba.lv>.

4.3. Beyond language – meeting of diverse worlds. Non-language-based approach

4.3.1 Introduction to non-linguistic approach

It is essential to note that each individual uses and understands language in their own unique way. Unlike with coding languages where multiple '0' and '1' create clear-cut commands, humans do not operate in a binary system. That means that communication does not rely only on purely linguistic meaning of words. Form of communication, environment in which communication takes place as well as other non-linguistic elements are necessary for a person to hear and to be heard.

Communication – even more so when performed in an intercultural setting – besides the exchange of words, is a process of sharing beliefs, values and worldviews. Forbes contributor Carol Kinsey Goman once said: "Every culture has rules that its members take for granted. Few of us are aware of our own biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. And while some of culture's knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, phobias and anxieties are taught explicitly, most is absorbed subconsciously."²¹ Hence, the awareness of the whole message which is sent by the communicating person to the receiver using both language and via all the non-verbal interaction, as well as proper decoding of the message and understanding of what one's culture brings to a conversation (how it influences their

¹⁹ For the more detailed description of some of the listed recommendations go to: Nancy J. Adler and Moses N. Kiggundu *Awareness at the Crossroad: Designing Translator-Based Training Programs* in D. Landis and R. Brislin, *Handbook of Intercultural Training: Issues in Training Mythology*, vol. II. New York: Pergamin Press, 1983, pp. 124-150.

²⁰ See: Sonnleitner, K., Gschweidl, V. (2021), CHAPTER 6 CONFLICT MANAGEMENT. *Conflict Diagnosis: How to deal with a conflict?*

²¹ Goman, C. K. (2011, November 28), *How Culture Controls Communication*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolkelseygomman/2011/11/28/how-culture-controls-communication/?sh=4d9630ec263b>

way of communicating intentions, emotions and feelings) are absolutely essential for an effective intercultural communication.

4.3.2. Non-linguistic obstacles – non-exhaustive overview

Whether a particular behaviour is perceived to be ‘right’ or ‘normal’ rather than ‘strange’ or ‘inadequate’ derives from cultural upbringing and values. It may be challenging to recognize and respond to culturally-dependent obstacles in a communication process.

The first intrinsic element in dealing with potential hurdle of that kind is to notice when communicating parties use culturally different frameworks and mechanisms that may hinder full mutual understanding. Below, the authors of the chapter present the non-exhaustive list of non-linguistic and other internal barriers to an effective communication.

Different dependence on context. Non-verbal communication includes facial expressions and gestures; but also room and seating arrangements, personal distance, sense of time or the level of assertiveness in communicating. The importance of non-verbal aspects in communication vary across cultures. Messages are coded in a physical context or in a non-verbal way, with few explicit words. Dependent on the importance and scope of context coded messages, scientists identify two types of cultures: high and low context cultures, where high-context cultures rely to a greater extent on more ambiguous methods of communication, with a lot of meaning assigned to a non-verbal communication, symbolism, customs and tradition. Stereotypically, some examples of high-context cultures would be Japan, Saudi Arabia or Spain, whereas among low-context cultures are typically Canada or USA.²²

Bypassing – as it was indicated on the linguistic level (see chapter above) and defined as when the symbolic meaning of words is not read correctly by communicators and the receiver gets the wrong meaning to what the sender intended, the same applies to non-verbal communication: tones, pitch of voice, other vocal cues.

In authors view, the perfect example of such bypassing would be a usage of a dot (‘.’) at the end of a one-word-long text message. *To illustrate, the authors encourage the readers to think of a possible reaction to a text: ‘Fine.’ received from an elderly professor or a teenage Snapchat user. Would the meaning and emotions associated differ when the same text comes from different people?*

Bias – is a phenomenon of misinterpretation and misjudgement of a message by applying tests and standards inherent and unique to one’s own culture. Ethnocentrism is the example of a more extreme cultural bias which takes place when someone deems their particular culture to be the only lens to look through at other cultures with an implied belief that their approach and culture are better than the other, leading to a negative opinion of behaviours different to the one-and-only right vision one presents.²³ *To exemplify bias, imagine what would be the reaction one might have while hearing that someone ate a dog compared to eating snails, shrimps, octopuses or pigs, cows, horses. Is it really that different?*

Stereotyping – is simply an overestimation of the degree of a link between group membership and psychological attributes. Even though, undoubtedly there is a link

²² Research shows, however, that the extent to which high or low-context is used in communication is also dependent on whether a conversation is happening in a work or non-work contexts, with some interesting changes, that are not typically in line with the general exemplification of high- or low-context cultures based on nationalities or countries. For the mentioned research see: Sanchez-Burks, J., Lee, F., Choi, I., Nisbett, R., Zhao, S., & Koo, J. (2003). *Conversing across cultures: East-West communication styles in work and nonwork contexts*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 363–372. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.363>.

²³ Sanchez-Burks, J., Lee, F., Choi, I., Nisbett, R., Zhao, S., & Koo, J. (2003), *Conversing across cultures: East-West communication styles in work and nonwork contexts*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 363–372. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.363>.

between group membership and particular traits or characteristics of its members, it is a mistake to depend and derive on it about individuals to the extent when one relies on oversimplified clichés. *The authors knowingly will not present any particular example of a stereotype, but rather will ask the addressee to think about the remark about their own nation/society which they deem impolite and/or hurtful.*

Conflicting values and communication styles²⁴ – behaviours are conditioned by culture. Above, in the paragraph about culture, the authors referred to the concept of culture as an iceberg - where values are ‘underwater’, and behaviours are the visible after effects thereof. Cultural misunderstandings may occur also when someone’s behaviours are conflicting with the other person’s values. Since cultural norms presented by individuals are not identical, therefore the intention and goal of behaviours is often confused and misjudged. What one struggles to understand will be often opposed or rendered wrong. Values we share strongly affect the way we communicate. Dependent on the system of values most common in particular culture, preferences as to communication styles and the way people express themselves are being shaped. Some common values/culture conditioned communication norms may be listed as follows: direct vs. indirect communication,²⁵ informality vs. formality, open vs. subtle disagreement, egalitarian vs. hierarchical. Operating in other systems could cause frustration, out-of-depth feeling or even feeling of being disrespected.

*One example, from authors experience would be when they - back while being first-time-visitors in India - were confused on whether a cab driver is just acknowledging they heard an inquiry about a possible ride or accepting the request for a lift by responding ‘Oki-fine.’*²⁶

Last, but not least – **Physical noise**²⁷ - subtly, yet greatly influences communication. Communication can be hindered not only by lack of understanding while the process takes place, but also by wrongly-adjusted conditions for such. *Wrong scheduling of a meeting, lack of coordination between time-zones, lack of mitigation of any negative effects the distance between communicating parties has on the process, a bad physical disposition of an individual (including the so called ‘Zoom fatigue’ or other)*²⁸ and *not-optimal physical condition of the other party* – are all potential factors that can interfere with effective communication. While according to Alistair Cockburn the most effective form of communication is a direct conversation between two people with the use of visual aids such as a whiteboard,²⁹ nowadays the significance of physical noises of all kinds is growing. The bigger the distance between interlocutors and the more technical channels are used as mediums (especially, in an era of quarantines, frequent home offices and limited travel opportunities) this category of obstacles simply cannot be overlooked.

²⁴ Compoin, T. (2018, July 9). *Six barriers to cross-cultural communications* (Part 2 of 3). Déclic International. <https://declicinternational.com/6-barriers-to-cross-cultural-communications/>

²⁵ Indirectness occurs when there is a discrepancy between sentence meaning and speaker meaning. Sentence meaning refers to the literal or semantic meaning of an utterance, and speaker meaning refers to what the speaker intends to accomplish with the remark. Sanchez-Burks, J., Lee, F., Choi, I., Nisbett, R., Zhao, S., & Koo, J. (2003). *Conversing across cultures: East-West communication styles in work and nonwork contexts*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 363–372. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.363>

²⁶ Another example would be the use of irony and sarcasm in Japanese culture, as one might argue that the use thereof is not typical in that culture. It is reasonable to learn beforehand about the culture of someone so as not to be deemed offensive or unserious, especially in an effort of having a sensitive conversation with someone whose origins are in Japanese culture. E. (2019, September 23), *The Role of Communication in Conflict*. Penn State. Cultural Leadership Blog. <https://sites.psu.edu/global/2019/09/23/the-role-of-communication-in-conflict/>

²⁷ By definition a physical noise is any factor - external or environmental- distracting from receiving the intended message sent by a communicator. Rothwell, D. J. (2017), *In the Company of Others: An Introduction to Communication* (Illustrated ed.). Oxford University Press, USA.

²⁸ *How to Combat Zoom Fatigue*. (2021, February 2), Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/how-to-combat-zoom-fatigue%20or%20https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2020/04/coronavirus-zoom-fatigue-is-taxing-the-brain-here-is-why-that-happens/>

²⁹ Cockburn, A. (2001). *Agile Software Development*. Addison-Wesley.

4.3.3. Dealing with non-linguistic obstacles

To deal with the above-mentioned obstacles to an effective communication, it is crucial to present intercultural traits, develop intercultural mind-set and master international capabilities.

Vital traits while communicating in a multi-cultural setting are such as open-mindedness, tolerance of ambiguity, patience and flexibility. For a successful communication it is necessary to identify how many and what types of cultures play a role in every particular conversation, video-call or even an e-mail exchange. Respect and deep understanding of cultural differences are key to successful cross-cultural communication.

Ethnocentrism or simplistic attitudes are bound to lead to miscommunication. On the contrary - sophisticated worldviews embracing diversity among people, their various backgrounds, cultural differences and similarities foster the sense of a friendly, good-faith communication environment. Curiosity and ultimate capability to distinguish statements and facts from opinions, contexts and values are critical.

Below the authors list some guidelines to apply with the aim to avoid potential miscommunications and obtain more productive cross-cultural interaction. It is crucial to:

- never forget to do the homework – learning and showing knowledge of other countries and cultures; becoming aware of customs in relevant regions, while guarding against stereotypes as it is not possible to predict a person's behaviour based solely on their nationality or origin. Each individual is unique and should be deemed as such;

- show respect – to an individual as a person, to their community and their background; it may help to explicitly mention in a conversation that different cultures meet and merge all in order to set the right tone of a conversation and foster the atmosphere of good faith and openness;

- stay flexible in social interactions – it is essential to be ready to flex one's own style by adjusting the directness of communication, gestures, posture and more; an effective communicator should stay alert to what is new or against their natural preferences and should try to determine if it is a cultural difference, so as to consciously tune in or address it without harmful disruption in a communication process;

- never assume full understanding of a message and its meaning, (neither that messages sent were received without any disturbance by the listener nor that they grasped fully those of whomever they communicated with); to deal with mishaps in that regard, one could resort to labelling as it allows communicating parties to identify correctly the dynamics, emotions or circumstances implied from the other party's words, actions or demeanor; moreover, it transpires to be helpful to put a positive label on what is heard or seen from the other side; just as important as being forthcoming and labelling actions, it is to explain words or manner in order to convey the full meaning and help the receiver correctly decode messages. It is crucial to remember that the owner of the message owns the results, so once again it is good to 'take the burden' of the communication.

- normalize – communicating across cultures is often a foreign territory where it is easy to be taken aback by the other sides' words or behaviours that are particular to other cultures and uncommon to ours; firstly, each individual should make an effort to become comfortable with the fact that surprises or astonishment are more than certain to occur; in no situation should they be allowed to hinder communication. Simple inquiries, questions and seeking clarifications could be used as normalizing tools. Shock or other such feelings are - most likely - equally true to the other side as well, so it is essential never to forget to explain in a more explicit way intentions behind the sent messages, always highlight the

goal of the undertaken action and the words said. Also, in an effort to normalize - one can ask for feedback.

Good communication comes as a result of knowing and understanding who the other party is and what is the environment of communication, as well as properly preparing for the process of intercultural communication.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, multicultural communication competency can and should be learnt as it is considered crucial for a successful professional and personal life. Due to the fact that each person is an individual who was born and raised into many cultures, people do not communicate in void and culture plays a crucial role in communication. Therefore, culture needs to be acknowledged as one of the factors influencing the result of communication and whether speakers will understand each other and their messages to the fullest extent possible. In view of the above, a similar attention one gives to mastering language skills and careful choice of words, should be directed to intercultural awareness as it a fundamental puzzle in each and every conversation, e-mail exchange or any other cross-cultural interaction. Different cultures have different standards and rules. A deep understanding of conscious and unconscious effects that language-based and non-linguistic cultural elements have on the process of communication, helps in adjusting communication style to ensure it is effective. Individuals, however, while shaped by their cultural background, are not limited by it. To succeed in multicultural communication, it is important to recognize any present obstacles of cultural origin and make necessary efforts to mitigate any negative effect they may have. It is crucial to acknowledge that no one is born proficient in multicultural communication. It is a skill and the authors of the article are certain, it can be acquired, mastered and applied in the future!