SIGNALS, SYMBOLS, AND VIBES:
AN EXERCISE IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTION*

DANIEL J. MYERS   **ALEXANDER J. BUOYE**   **JANET MCDERMOTT**
University of Notre Dame   *University of Notre Dame*   *Columbus State Community College*

DOUGLAS E. STRICKLER   **ROGER G. RYMAN**
University of Notre Dame   *University of Notre Dame*

AMONG THE TOPICS usually covered in introductory sociology courses, culture may be the most far-reaching and immediately relevant. Not only do cultural concerns cut across virtually every other topic in introductory courses, but the increasing diversity of the American population and the trend toward globalization demand that students understand the challenges and rewards inherent in cross-cultural interaction (Schmid 1995). As cross-cultural contact continues to increase and the boundaries among cultures become less and less clear, the skills needed to negotiate a culturally complicated world will continue to grow in importance (Sleek 1998). When concepts about culture are taught in an introductory sociology course, an ideal teaching moment is created for exploring cross-cultural interaction. Furthermore, by providing exercises that involve cross-cultural communication, we can produce a better understanding of the elements of culture and simultaneously increase the relevance of our discipline for students.

Generating a true appreciation of the challenges of cross-cultural communication can be difficult, however. Some students are so deeply steeped in their own cultural traditions that the elements of other cultures are viewed as amusing, disgusting, or even pathological deviations from the norm. Mainstream introductory sociology texts can

unwittingly emphasize this perspective by providing shocking and entertaining examples of how cultural elements are expressed in other societies. For instance, an author may illustrate differences in symbolic communication by showing how the same gesture means something quite different in the United States, Nigeria, or the Middle East (e.g., Axtell 1991; Macionis 1999; Renzetti and Curran 1998). While this approach is an obviously useful way to demonstrate cultural differences, it does not address the subtleties or difficulties of cross-cultural interaction.

Other students may feel that they are very open to cross-cultural differences and already well prepared for cross-cultural interaction. While openness to interaction and differences is laudable, these students often lack experience in cross-cultural settings and underestimate the difficulties that may arise (while simultaneously overestimating their ability to overcome such problems).

Most students, therefore, could benefit from a supplement to their culture modules that helps them begin to develop the skill of identifying cultural differences and teaches how their reactions to these differences define and redefine the social setting. Instead of just knowing that the "thumbs up" sign can mean "up yours" in some places, students will benefit more by learning about patterns of interaction in cross-cultural settings, how to recognize differences, and how to deal with these differences once they arise (Dumont 1995).

It was with these concerns in mind that we developed the "Signals, Symbols, and Vibes" exercise. The exercise uses relatively simple cultural elements, both material and non-material (Newman 1997), to

form two artificial cultures that both oppose and complement each other. In their earnest efforts to interact with the other "game" culture, students learn that cultural differences exist, that they must try to discern the cultural patterns of the other in order to achieve a successful interaction, and that negative reactions resulting from minor cultural infractions can exacerbate interaction difficulties in ways that are difficult to overcome. At the same time, students who work hard to overcome the communication challenges appreciate the rewards of well-spent effort.

THE EXERCISE

Materials
Materials needed include: (1) descriptions of their culture for members of each group, (2) 3 or 4 sheets each of two different colors of paper, and (3) tape.

Step 1
Use the different colored paper and tape to mark off distinct areas in the room (we will use red and blue in this discussion of the exercise). The red and blue areas should be interspersed to allow for freedom of movement from area to area during the exercise. One simple configuration would designate two opposite corners of the room as "blue areas" and the corners adjacent to them as red. A more complex set-up could designate one corner as a blue area while the walls immediately adjacent to this corner could be red areas. The reverse color scheme could be used in the opposite corner of the room. For larger classes, more color zones may be necessary. It is most important to allow for free movement among the zones, thereby permitting the class to explore different possibilities for interaction. It is not advisable to mark one half of the room red and the other half blue, for example, as the possibilities for the interaction (as governed by the rules of the exercise) will be too restricted.

Step 2
Divide the class into two fictional

"cultures," culture A and culture B. We have found it useful to use generic cultures with generic names rather than using approximations of actual cultures and/or labels to which students may impute some meaning or bias. The method by which the class is divided is relatively unimportant as long as the composition of each culture appears more or less random. It would not be advisable, for example, to divide the class by sex.

Step 3
Present each member of the two cultures with the rules or norms of interaction for his or her culture, and allow the participants time to read and digest the norms. Appendix A provides descriptions of both cultures. It is apparent that cross-cultural communication difficulties are inevitable, but it is also possible to achieve successful interaction if the participants are not completely rigid in adhering to their cultural norms.

Step 4
After the students have digested the instructions, direct the members of culture A to disperse themselves throughout the room. The members of culture A will act as hosts to visiting members from culture B.[1] Once they are settled, direct culture B members to enter the interaction area. Because culture B members do not speak and culture A members may not initiate interaction in red areas, it is inadvisable to direct all members of culture B to red areas. Nor is it advisable to direct all culture B members to blue areas, as this will obscure the importance of the colored areas as interaction cues. Take note of the patterns of interaction for the discussion after the exercise is completed. Allow-

---

[1]When culture A acts as the host and culture B must communicate non-verbally, students may develop a sense that inequality exists between the two cultures. This is not necessarily bad because it can add a status-related dimension to the exercise analogous to what sometimes occurs in a minority-majority interaction. If the instructor wishes to have more balanced power between the two groups, culture B may be directed to be the hosts.

ing the students to interact for about 10 minutes provides satisfactory progress through the different interaction possibilities.

Step 5
While the interaction in the exercise is important, the discussion that follows is even more so, as students try to decipher what actually happened and how this relates to course material about culture and cross-cultural interaction in real life. After conducting this exercise multiple times, we have recorded the discussion questions that consistently evoked the most useful and engaging comments from students. These discussion topics are tabulated in Appendix B.

OUTCOMES OF THE EXERCISE

We have conducted this exercise in introductory sociology courses in conjunction with modules about culture, at student leadership conferences concerned with multi-cultural issues, and at staff training in residence halls. In all cases, participants picked up on both the purpose of the exercise and some of the rules of the other culture very quickly. Nonetheless, most students reported that interaction was very difficult to maintain despite figuring out some of the other group's cultural norms. In most instances, some members of culture B simply dropped out and refused further attempts at interaction because they were so frustrated from trying to communicate non-verbally with their chatty culture A counterparts. Their behavior produced additional fodder for discussion after the exercise regarding the potentially alienating effects of cross-cultural interaction.

However, the exercise did not simply reinforce the idea that cross-cultural communication is inherently conflictual. Some of the most fruitful and interesting behaviors we observed in these exercises were the ways students attempted to manage interaction by compromising. They realized that they would not be successful if they rigidly interpreted and followed the norms of their

culture. For example, both groups adhered fairly strictly to speech norms, but despite the fact that culture A was a verbal culture, they added gesturing to their interaction repertoire in order to bridge the gap to culture B. In other cases, participants made judgments about which norms they deemed minor enough to violate. For example, culture A members seemed open to abandoning their one-on-one interaction norm when it became apparent that culture B members were nearly impossible to isolate. It was not uncommon to see a group of culture A members interacting with a group of culture B members. Thus, each group seemed to create either intentionally or unintentionally, a hierarchy of norms reflecting the folkways of a larger society. Both of these interaction patterns are useful in discussing tensions regarding cultural pluralism and assimilation. How much should each group compromise? What norms can be violated? How much compromise is warranted to produce positive interaction?

Students also quickly developed stereotypes of the other culture, and a sense of ethnocentrism during the exercise. Those from culture B often described culture A as the "touchy, feely" group. Culture A members often characterized culture B as "antisocial" or "cold." Culture A frequently viewed themselves as highly hospitable and culture B as simply rude. Culture B members sometimes felt misunderstood, and that culture A was very pushy and inconsiderate. The ethnocentrism that developed during the exercise and the ethnocentrism that students brought into the exercise proved to be a very important aspect of the post-exercise discussion (more on this below).

STUDENT EVALUATIONS

In addition to evaluative information gathered during the discussion portions of the exercise and through informal interactions with students after the exercise, we administered a brief evaluation questionnaire to one of the larger classes (N=37) at the end of the exercise. The main results from the questionnaire are given in Appendix C.

In total, we have conducted this exercise 12 times in sociology classrooms, and each time, students have reacted very positively to it. They report enjoying the exercise and having fun despite the obstacles of communication placed before them. More importantly though, post-exercise discussions indicated that the exercise had value beyond what students had learned in lecture sections about culture and cultural differences. Students reported that the exercise not only illustrated sociological concepts well, but also helped them gain a more concrete appreciation of the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural communication. Once students understood the complete picture of the other culture, they saw the problematic shortcomings in their own assumptions about what was happening in their interaction. In addition, students remarked that the exercise would make them more sensitive to their own behavior, and the "vibes" they were producing in cross-cultural situations.

Like all simulation games, this exercise was not designed to accurately reflect all of the complexities of real life cross-cultural interaction. Simulation exercises necessarily simplify reality (Bredemeier 1978; Dorn 1989), and most students are astute enough to pick this up from the beginning. Nonetheless, most students felt the exercise approximated reality well enough to make the lessons learned applicable outside the classroom. In response to the questionnaire (item 1 in Appendix C), there was a mix of opinion regarding the exercise's realism. The majority (57%) felt that the exercise provided a fairly accurate representation of real life cross-cultural dilemmas. A sizable group (30%) felt that the direct opposition of cultural elements in the two cultures overstated the difficulties of cross-cultural communication, and a smaller portion (14%) recognized that because the cultural norms were not embedded in a long-term socialization process, they were easier to violate, and in this sense, understated the difficulties in cross-cultural communication. These divergent positions provided another avenue for discussing how difficult cross-cultural interaction really is, where this difficulty comes

from, and how challenging it is to overcome.

Part of student reactions to the exercise stemmed from whether they were members of game culture A or B. Because students brought assumptions about interaction and communication from their real-life cultures into the game, their previous experience colored their perceptions of both the culture to which they were assigned and the culture with which they were trying to interact. In general, students' real cultural backgrounds gave them more difficulty appreciating culture B than culture A (item 2 in Appendix C), at least until the discussion period in which the complete set of norms for both cultures were revealed. These students reported that, despite the cultural rules of the game, they continued to judge things through their "real-life cultural lenses." Students participating in culture A also found it easier to apply the game culture's norms to judge interaction than did students in culture B. Those in culture B most often reported maintaining the standards of their real culture during the game (item 3 in Appendix C).

We found this difference in response to the cultures to be very useful in discussions of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism. By recognizing the difficulties they had in abandoning their usual cultural norms and invoking the standards of another culture, students began to understand the power of ethnocentrism and how difficult it can be to overcome, even when the interaction stakes are relatively low. Suspending prior cultural norms was very difficult even among those students eager to do so. In addition to setting aside old cultural norms, students also recognized the importance and difficulty of taking on new cultural lenses. The exercise highlights how this transition in perspective is more difficult the greater the differences between the culture of origin and the adopted culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR IMPLEMENTATION

To maximize the effectiveness of this exer-

cise and avoid potential problems, we wish to make several recommendations for the process. First, it is important for the instructor to monitor interaction throughout the exercise. This will not only aid the discussion by allowing the instructor to question people about their specific behaviors, but will also allow her or him to terminate the exercise once novel behaviors have been exhausted. We have suggested a ten-minute interaction time, but this may be too long or too short depending on the size of the group, and their creativity and resilience in the social interaction.

We have run the exercise in groups ranging from 10 to 40, and the ideal number of participants seems to be around 20. As the groups become very small (around 10), there will be somewhat less variety in interaction simply because there are fewer individuals. As the class size increases, the ability of the instructor to monitor all of the participants begins to decrease. As a rule-of-thumb, we recommend recruiting an additional observer if the group exceeds 25 students, and an additional observer for every 10 students beyond that. It is possible, however, to run the exercise with a large group and a single observer because participants also act as observers (albeit in a less systematic manner), and report their observations during discussion. Informal student responses from the larger classes indicate that the sheer size of the group is less important than ensuring adequate space to circulate and interact. Alternatively, the exercise can be conducted by one group while others watch (a viable strategy for many of these sorts of exercises when class size is large, see Takata 1997).

A final problem raised by students in the larger groups, was keeping track of who belonged to what culture. However, it also came out in discussion that this feature of larger group interaction added more to the realism of the exercise. In the real world, it is often difficult to attribute specific cultural expectations to an individual—particularly in modern, multicultural societies. However, in terms of maximizing cross-cultural interaction in the exercise as a learning experience, students reported that uncertainty regarding other students' assignments made them tentative and less likely to approach someone. If desired, the instructor can reduce this ambiguity by using colored stickers or badges to indicate the members of each culture.

CONCLUSION

Positive cross-cultural interaction demands an understanding of cultural elements in different cultures. Even more, perhaps, it demands an appreciation of the process of interaction between cultures and the various missteps that can lead participants astray. Understanding the elements and consequences associated with cross-cultural interaction is taking on greater and greater importance as societies become increasingly global in nature—both through new and improving information technologies and the nature of international business. Today's college students are more likely than ever to be required to deal with individuals from other cultures, whether in their travels or their own backyard. This exercise helps students begin to recognize the dynamic relationship of communication and norms, and to think about how they can overcome these difficulties in other environments.

APPENDIX A. CULTURAL NORMS IN THE SIGNALS GAME

CULTURE A

Your job as a member of culture A is to welcome people from culture B into your group. Try to interact as much as possible and make them feel as comfortable as you can in your environment.

Things that are important in culture A:

Appendix A. con't

1. Make eye contact with everyone you meet.
2. Laughing and joking are important ways to show how friendly you are.
3. Welcome new people into your group with a pat on the back or by putting your arm around them. (Instructors should be aware of the possibility that physical contact may be unwanted by some members of the class. To avoid this issue, the instructions can be modified to suggest a handshake.)
4. It is important to interact with your own gender first. Being able to interact with those most like you is an important way to show you can interact well with others.
5. The colors blue and red have important significance to you. Red is an indicator of interaction, but blue is where first meetings should take place. Therefore, if someone is in a "blue" area, you may greet him or her, escort him or her to a "red" area, and interact with them. But if someone is in a "red" area without first being in a "blue" area, you will ignore her or him.
6. Since you wish to get to know people as well as possible, you prefer to interact with them one-on-one.

CULTURE B

You are entering into a new environment that you know little about.

Things that are important to you as a member of culture B:

1. You communicate through body language, therefore you have no need of spoken language.
2. Avoid direct eye contact. In your culture, you concentrate on other parts of the body to communicate.
3. Since non-verbal communication is so important, you generally do not touch others since you need to be observing their body movements.
4. You are aware that the culture you are entering uses verbal communication.
5. Blue is a very important, honored color in your culture and you are aware that red is an important color in the culture you are entering.
6. Laughing is considered a thoughtless insult in your culture that alienates others. You would never laugh unless you intended to slight someone.
7. When interacting with new people, it is important to go to people of the opposite sex first. This shows that you are open and willing to interact with everyone.
8. Because relationships are important to you, people from your culture prefer to stay in pairs, particularly in a new environment.

APPENDIX B. DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. What were the rules/norms of the other culture?
2. Explain each group's rules. *Why* did they do things the way they did?
3. How did it feel to be pushed away?
4. How did it feel to be welcomed?
5. Did you feel you wanted to be around members of your own group?
6. How did it feel when you were trying to welcome someone and you failed or when you were successful?
7. Discuss the importance of non-verbal signs/symbols/behaviors.
8. Were you uncomfortable with the uncertainty about their reactions or acceptance of you?
9. Did you ever feel alone or isolated?
10. Did you ever want to just give up?
11. How does this relate to real life?
12. How did the norms and values from your real culture affect your interaction in the game culture?
13. Would real-life cross-cultural interaction be easier or harder?
14. Relate to concepts from class and text: components of culture, elements of culture shock, material versus non-material, ethnocentrism/relativity, in-group/out-group, and so on.

APPENDIX C. STUDENT RESPONSES TO EXERCISE EVALUATION SURVEY

1. How well do you think the exercise approximated real-life cross-cultural communicaton difficulties?
   30% Overstated (communication would be easier in real life)
   57% Pretty close to reality
   14% Understated (communication would be more difficult in real life)

2. How did your "real" culture affect your view of the "game culture" to which you were assigned?

Culture A Members	Culture B Members	
59%	10%	It made me look favorably on my assigned culture.
12%	50%	It made me look unfavorably on my assigned culture.
29%	35%	No effect.

3. In evaluating the "other culture" from the exercise, which do you think colored your impressions more: your "game" culture or your "real" culture?

Culture A Members	Culture B Members	
47%	15%	Game
47%	70%	Real
6%	15%	Don't know

4. Which statement do you think best describes the exercise?
   83.8% Enjoyable and helped me understand cultural concepts better.
   13.5% Somewhat useful, but I would rather just take notes on lecture material.
   2.7% Waste of time; it added nothing to my understanding of cultural concepts.

REFERENCES

Axtell, R. E. 1991. *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language around the World.* New York: Wiley.

Bredemeier, Mary A. 1978. "Providing Referents for Sociological Concepts: Simulation Gaming." *Teaching Sociology* 5:409-21.

Dorn, Dean S. 1989. "Simulation Games: One More Tool on the Pedagogical Shelf." *Teaching Sociology* 17:1-18.

Dumont, Clayton W., Jr. 1995. "Toward a Multi-Cultural Sociology: Bringing Post-Modernism into the Classroom." *Teaching Sociology* 23:307-20.

Macionis, John J. 1999. *Sociology*, 7th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Newman, David M. 1997. *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Renzetti, Claire M. and Daniel J. Curran. 1998. *Living Sociology.* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Schmid, Thomas J. 1995. "Contributing to the Cultural Dialogue: Sociological Analyses of Cultural Pluralism." *Teaching Sociology* 23:331-40.

Sleek, Scott. 1998. "Psychology's Cultural Competence, Once 'Simplistic,' Now Broadening." *APA Monitor* 29(2):1-27.

Takata, Susan R. 1997. "The Chairs Game-Competition versus Cooperation: Sociological Uses of Musical Chairs." *Teaching Sociology* 25:200-206.

Daniel Myers is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. His current research focuses on the diffusion models for collective behavior, media coverage of collective violence, racial rioting, and game theory. In addition to teaching introductory sociology, he also teaches courses on social movements, statistics, and research methods.

Alexander Buoye is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Notre Dame. He currently works as a project coordinator with Talk City Online Research Services in Westfield, NJ. His research interests include sociology of education, symbolic interactionism, and collective violence. In addition to introductory sociology, he has taught statistics, research methods, social problems, and ethnic and racial conflict resolution.

Janet McDermott is an academic advisor at Columbus State Community College. She advises Associate of Arts and Sciences, undecided, and transfer students. In addition to advising she also does career counseling and coordinates New Student Orientation.

Roger Ryman is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Notre Dame. His research and teaching interests are in the area of race and stratification.

Douglas Strickler is a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Notre Dame. His main teaching and research interests are in the sociology of religion.