

The secret of successful intercultural communication

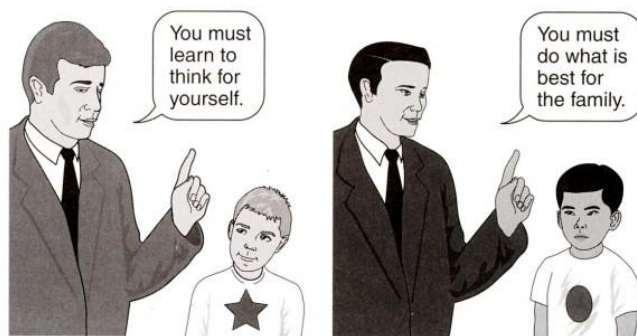
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FIGURE 3-1 Individualism versus Collectivism



from: Chaney & Martin, 2003, p. 57

“What is the secret to successful intercultural communication?” This was one of the questions I was asked after [my lecture on “New directions in intercultural communication” at United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain](#). In my lecture I had been exploring the assumptions underlying the intercultural communication advice literature, particularly in the vein of [Geert Hofstede’s work](#). Detailed arguments against the banal nationalism, monolithic and

monodimensional views of culture, and the pseudo-objectivism undergirding that strand of the intercultural communication literature can be found [here](#) and [here](#), and also in [my new book](#). So, my response was about the importance of appreciating diversity and avoiding advice that closes the mind to other cultures rather than opens it to an appreciation of diversity. Ultimately, there is no golden bullet simply because intercultural communication per se does not exist.

Intercultural communication advice is based on the assumption that intercultural communication is intercultural communication, as encapsulated in this diagram from the textbook [Intercultural Business Communication by Chaney & Martin](#). The assumption is that the cultural value orientations of “collectivism” vs. “individualism” operate in all societies in the same manner. Not only does such a diagram reinforce and re-create the East-West dichotomy rather than explaining it, it also suggests that difference works along the same dimensions in different cultures. However, explicit instruction about how to think imparted by suit-and-tie-wearing fathers to their only son is without a doubt one of the most extraordinarily **specific** cultural practices one can think of. As a matter of fact, I don’t know anyone, from any background I am familiar with, who goes about teaching cultural values in this way. Not only are “Eastern” or “Western” fathers unlikely to be explicitly teaching their sons “to think for themselves” or “to do what is best for the family,” the inculcation of values, which in themselves are highly diverse, is subject to a wide range of practices. Diagrams such as these don’t teach about cultural difference; such literatures close the mind to cultural difference.

So, part of the secret to successful intercultural communication is to avoid advice that closes the mind! Ever [^] : may sound intuitively right, as much intercultural communication advice literature does, because it is built on widely circulating stereotypes and reinforces them.

There is no magic bullet because we do not meet as representatives of national cultures unless we choose to see each other and engage each other as representatives of national cultures. It all depends on context. In the absence of useful advice from much of the literature that makes intercultural communication its business, I hold with the golden rule of all faiths and moral philosophies: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

What is your secret of successful intercultural communication?



BANAL NATIONALISM

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION



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