



Monk Prayogshala Research Institution
Non-WEIRD Science

CROSS-CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

Unveiling Cross-Cultural Communication Styles

How culture influences the way we communicate.

Updated September 10, 2023

Reviewed by Abigail Fagan



KEY POINTS

- Non-verbal communication varies across cultures and can **trigger misunderstandings**.
- **Context, an important factor in cross-cultural communication, influences the meaning of words and cues.**
- People are often aware and understanding of differences in communication styles due to globalization.

This post was written by Alison Fernandes, research affiliate at the Department of Psychology, Monk Prayogshala.

Communication serves as the cornerstone of human interaction, intricately shaped by cultural nuances and variations.

The diversity of communication styles across cultures is a testament to the complex interplay of historical, societal, and cultural factors. From linguistic differences to differences in gestures and facial expressions, there exists a variety in the distinction in communication styles.

Communication in humans involves spoken communication through language as well as non-verbal communication such as gestures, body language, facial expressions and much more. Such non-verbal communication can be as varied as the languages spoken worldwide.

The Western communication style, prevalent in North America and parts of Europe, **prioritizes individualism, directness, and assertiveness**. This style values forthrightness and encourages open expressions of opinions and desires, even if they diverge from others'. Conversely, **Eastern cultures**, found in regions like East Asia and the Middle East, **lean towards indirectness, group harmony, and high-context communication**. This communication pattern **emphasizes the preservation of social equilibrium and often relies on non-verbal cues**

Communication
differences
between the
west and
east

for expression.

Non-verbal communication nuances vary across cultures, with the potential to trigger misunderstandings or enrich intercultural interactions. When it comes to eye contact, research has shown that cultural norms surrounding eye contact behavior might influence one's perception of said eye contact. Direct eye contact, a staple of Western communication, symbolizes attentiveness and confidence. People who make eye contact are often seen as being more trustworthy and credible. However, in Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact may be seen as intrusive or aggressive. Individuals in Eastern cultures are also more likely to perceive faces with direct eye contact as being angry, unapproachable or unpleasant. Such differences in cultural norms during communication should ideally be kept in mind when communicating with people from a different culture.

How eye contact is perceived.

Gestures too are laden with cultural significance. In our increasingly globalized world, effective cross-cultural communication is pivotal for fostering understanding and collaboration. Understanding the communication context is essential. The same gestures can have different meanings in different cultures. The book *Bodytalk* by Desmond Morris is an interesting reference for gestures used all over the world and their meaning.

It's not just your own body language that can differ, the way you interact with others might differ depending upon the cultural context as well. For example, the level of interpersonal touching might differ from culture to culture. This has led to the conceptualisation of high-contact and low-contact cul-

The differences
within
contact

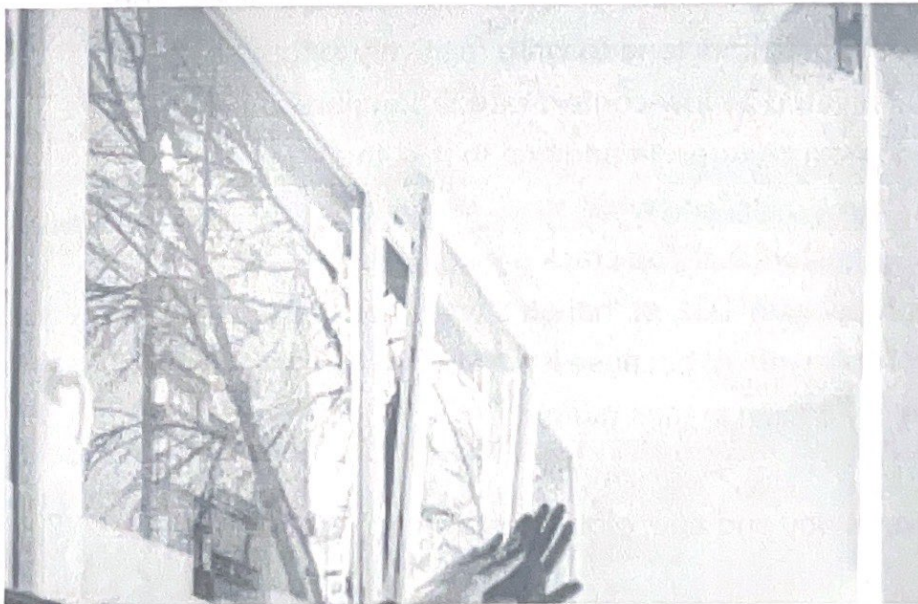
tures. Generally, interpersonal touching is more common in contemporary Western societies than in Asian cultures. Similarly, Latin American cultures are considered high contact while Middle Eastern cultures can be considered low-contact or non-contact cultures. Such assertions could lead to over-generalizations as well, and due to globalization, they might not be valid as well. In addition to this, an individual's personal boundaries might also stem from their upbringing as well.

This post in *Psychology Today* discusses why some people don't like to be touched as a product of their attachment style. Regardless, keeping abreast of cultural differences might make interactions with people from different cultures smoother.

One of the most important factors in cross-cultural communication is context. Context refers to the setting in which communication takes place, as well as the shared knowledge and experiences of the communicators. The context can influence the meaning of words, gestures, and other nonverbal cues. Cultures can therefore be placed on a continuum of high-context to low-context cultures based on how important implicit

information is in communication in that culture. This is a concept that was first described by Edward Hall. In addition to this, gestures too can have different meanings in different cultures. For example, a smile can have different meanings in different cultures. In Western cultures, a smile is often seen as a sign of happiness or pleasure. However, in some Eastern cultures, a smile can also be used to hide sadness or anger. Another example is the gesture of pointing. In Western cultures, pointing is a common way to indicate something or someone. However, in some cultures, pointing is considered rude or disrespectful. The context can also influence the way that people interpret the tone of voice. In some Western cultures, a direct and assertive tone is considered to be respectful. However, in Eastern cultures, particularly in Chinese and Japanese society, a more indirect and deferential tone is preferred. It is important to be aware of the different cultural contexts when communicating with people from other cultures. By understanding the context, you can avoid misunderstandings and ensure that your message is communicated effectively.

How different gestures are perceived





Top: Hellba/Unsplash

However, today, because of technology we are more connected than ever before. And our interactions on the internet are also shaped by our cultural upbringing. As mentioned earlier, cultures can range from high to low context with respect to communication. Research has shown that **low-context communicators tend to write relatively longer and less polite (as rated by low-context raters) compared to others in high-context cultures.** In addition to this, the **slang words we might use during online communication differs culturally as well.** For instance, if you crack a joke, your American friend might reply with 'LOL' or 'hahaha' while your German friend might reply with 'g' because it stands for the German word Grinsen — which means grinning.

The differences within texting

In today's day and age, globalization has increased the inter-

connectedness between different parts of the world and with just one swipe we can communicate with anyone in the world. Globalization has also led to an increase in exposure to other cultures through travel, media and the internet. As a result, people are more likely to be aware of the differences in communication styles elsewhere and be more understanding of them. As a result, we might see an erasure in the differences in our communication styles as we become more culturally diverse.



About the Author



Monk Prayogshala Research Institution is a not-for-profit academic research institution in Mumbai, India.

Online: [Monk Prayogshala](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#),