The aim of this chapter is to present theories of intercultural interaction and communication.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter the reader should be able to:
- Identify theories related to intercultural interaction and communication
- Identify variables that influence intercultural interaction and communication
- Understand the influence of culture on social interaction and communication
- Draw the models of intercultural interaction and communication

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural interaction and communication refer to interaction and communication between persons who are distinct from one another in cultural terms. This is in contrast to interpersonal interaction and communication between persons who are distinct in terms of their person-specific qualities. Intercultural interaction and communication theories seek to understand how people from different countries and cultures interact, communicate, and perceive the world around them. Most of these theories relate to the management of social interaction and communication for the purpose of creating meaning across cultures. The theories developed can be and have been applied to many fields of studies, such as consumer behavior, marketing, advertising, and website design. As businesses become more international, it is important for them to learn how to interact and communicate with customers and employees. Intercultural theories are now used within education, health care, and other public services due to growing multicultural populations. Intercultural theories are of particular importance to
international tourism due to the rapid increase in the number of tourists from different cultural backgrounds.

### 3.1 COMMUNICATION RESOURCEFULNESS THEORY (CRT)

The Communication Resourcefulness Theory (CRT) (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) refers to the ability of the individual to use three types of resources – cognitive (knowledge), affective (motivation) and behavioral (skill) – in order to communicate appropriately and effectively in diverse social situations (see Figure 3.1). Knowledge means knowing what behavior is best suited for a given situation. Motivation means having the desire to communicate in a competent manner. Skill means having the ability to apply the best-suited behavior in the given context. The CRT explains how people can approach social interaction with culturally different strangers. Some individuals treat an intercultural encounter with others as a source of knowledge, challenge, and learning (use cognitive resources), while others develop fear and become anxious about it. Some individuals can be motivated by self and self-ego (use affective resources); others can focus on others. Some people can develop a wide range of verbal and non-verbal skills (use behavioral resources) to respond to strangers and learn from them. Others can be unresponsive and unwilling to learn about and from strangers.

Culture plays a major role in developing knowledge, motivation, and skills for intercultural encounters. For example, members of individualistic cultures usually are self-oriented and develop skills that help them to meet their individual needs. On the other hand, members of collectivistic cultures are usually other-oriented and develop skills and activities aimed at caring about others. Similarly, members of the high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are cautious about strangers and foreigners and thus experience difficulties in learning from strangers and foreigners. In contrast,
members of the low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures are open, willing to accept strangers and foreigners, and learn from them something new.

### 3.2 EPISODE REPRESENTATION THEORY (ERT)

The Episode Representation Theory (ERT) (Forgas, 1983) assumes that those who are involved in intercultural encounters and communication differ in terms of cognitive representations of social episodes such as the degree of intimacy, involvement, friendliness, self-confidence, activity, evaluation of each encounter, the importance of task-versus-relationship orientation, anxiety, and values (see Figure 3.2). Cultural differences play an important role in how people think about the social episodes. The greater the cultural differences between interactants and communicators, the more difficult it is for them to understand the social episodes. For example, members of collectivistic cultures (e.g., in Asia) perceive social episodes in terms of collective values, while members of individualistic cultures perceive the same social episodes in terms of competitiveness and individualism. Similarly, members of high-power-distance cultures perceive social episodes in terms of usefulness, as opposed to members of low-power-distance cultures that perceive these episodes in terms of pleasure and joy.

![Figure 3.2](image-url)

**Figure 3.2**

Episode Representation Theory (ERT).
The degree of differences in social episodes and difficulties experienced in intercultural interactions is determined by a person’s social skills. For example, those with highly developed social skills treat social episodes positively and see them in terms of high involvement, intensity, and friendliness, while those with poorly developed social skills treat social episodes negatively and develop fear and anxiety.

### 3.3 EXPECTATIONS THEORY (ET)

This theory argues that social behavior and communication are influenced by people’s expectations about others’ behavior, in particular how others who receive their message will respond to what they say (Miller & Steinberg, 1975). People’s expectations are determined by their knowledge, beliefs/attitudes, stereotypes, self-concept, social roles, prior interaction, and social status (Berger & Zelditch, 1985) (see Figure 3.3). The more accurate the knowledge and information people have about others, the fewer stereotypes, prejudices, negative attitudes, and expectations they develop. In order to gain accurate information about others, people must interact directly with members of other cultures; they must ask questions, share and exchange views, and not be afraid to self-disclose.

People’s concept of self (the way they define themselves) and their social roles influence how people relate to one another and what they expect from another persons’ behavior. For example, when people define themselves as unique and distinct individuals, their interaction and communication with others is interpersonal, whereas when they define themselves as members of a group,
their interaction and communication with others is called inter-group. In inter-group interaction and communication, people’s expectations about others’ behavior are influenced more by their beliefs about and attitudes toward people than by one-on-one relationships.

Social status also determines expectations about others. Social status is determined by external factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, attractiveness, education, occupation, income), expressive factors (e.g., eye contact, speech style, dialect), and indicative factors (someone’s statement that he/she grew up in a high/low status family). Culture plays an important role in how people assess their status. For example, in high-power-distance cultures (e.g., Japan) professional status is very important; people need to know in advance the professional position of the person they are about to interact with in order to determine how to address that person correctly. The introductory business cards (meisibi cards) that are exchanged at the beginning of each social encounter and conversation indicate the owner’s status. On the other hand, in a low-power-distance society like Australia, attempts to assess someone’s professional status are regarded as rude.

Expectations of others’ behavior are not always met. If person A does not have knowledge of, or has inadequate knowledge of, person B’s culture, the expectations of person A’s own culture prevail. As a result, person A can develop ethnocentrism, stereotypes, or prejudice towards person B. According to the Expectancy Violation Theory, when communicative norms are violated, the violation may be perceived either favorably or unfavorably, depending upon the perception that the receiver has of the violator. Thus, when person B’s behavior is in accordance with person A’s expectations, person A assesses person B usually positively. However, when person B’s behavior violates expectations of person A, person A negatively evaluates person B. In inter-cultural encounters in which participants are from different cultural backgrounds, there is a higher rate of negative evaluations of partners than in intra-cultural encounters (Hoyle, Pinkley, & Insko, 1989).

### 3.4 CULTURAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATION THEORY (CINT)

The Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory (CINT) (Collier & Thomas, 1988) refers to communication between people of different cultural identities. In the process of intercultural communication and contact with others, people form, compare, judge, ascribe, negotiate, confirm, and challenge their cultural identities. This theory argues that by interacting and communicating with those who are culturally different, people negotiate stereotypes, opinions, norms, and meanings of, for example, concepts of time, feelings, or activities, which differ from one culture to another. Cultural identities influence interpretations of the meanings. When people identify with cultural groups, they are able to manipulate and understand systems of symbols and beliefs and are able to enact culturally appropriate and effective behavior with members of that group. The successful intercultural encounter is characterized by reaching an agreement as to
the negotiated meanings and norms. Once the agreement is reached the individuals’ cultural identities are positively enhanced (Collier, 1988) (see Figure 3.4). The CINT can be very useful in identifying similarities and differences in interpretations of rules, norms, feelings, and symbols. The theory also assumes that all individuals have many cultural identities. Cultural identity is dynamic and fluid because it is rendered in interaction. However, it also is transmitted from generation to generation, or from cultural group member to newcomer. One or more particular cultural identities may be salient in a given encounter.

![Figure 3.4](image)

Cultural Identity Negotiation Theory (CINT).

The CINT has its origin in the Social Identity Theory (SIT), a theory formed by Tajfel (1978) and John Turner, which assumes that individuals seek positive social identities in inter-group encounters. According to the SIT, individuals (1) put others (and themselves) into categories and label them as Muslim, Turk or piano player, (2) identify with certain groups (or in-groups) which help them to boost self-esteem, (3) compare their groups with other groups, and (4) desire their identity to be distinct from that of others.

### 3.5 MEANING OF MEANING THEORY

The Meaning of Meaning Theory (Richards, 1936) argues that misunderstanding takes place when people assume words have direct connections with their referent. However, words alone mean nothing. Meaning is created by the way people use words. In order to understand meanings, people use definitions, metaphors, language, or examples. Similar cultural background, a common past, history, and traditions facilitate understanding the meaning and reduce misunderstanding.

### 3.6 NETWORK THEORY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Network Theory in Intercultural Communication (Yum, 1988) has its origin in the Social Network Theory (SNT), which suggests that individuals are embedded in a structure or network of social relationships and are tied by their values, visions, ideas, friends, kinships, race, ethnicity, gender, dislikes and likes, conflicts, jobs, sexual relations, work relations, etc. Positions and social relationships, rather than beliefs and norms, are the main focus of the network. The social networks are
very complex (see Figure 3.5). There are many networks because there are many types of social relationships among individuals. Social networks operate on many levels, from families up to the level of nations. Members of the local networks share the same values, information and their communication style converges. Members of the national or regional networks diverge in the communication.

Precursors of SNT in the late 1800s were Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tonnies. They argued that individuals could be linked by shared values and beliefs (gemeinschaft) or impersonal, formal, and instrumental social links (gesselschaft). For example, individuals L, M, and N form gemeinschaft; they are closer to each because they may share cultural values and beliefs and be family members or in-group members. On the other hand, individuals C, D, and F form gesselschaft; they are more distant from each other because they may have only formal relations (e.g., work). George Simmel (1908/1971) pointed out the importance of nature and network size, and their influence on social interaction. Personal interactions occur when the network is small and ties are strong, whereas formal and official interactions occur when the network is larger and ties are looser.

The Network Theory in Intercultural Communication (Yum, 1988) is based on the assumption that intercultural communication is more heterogeneous than intracultural communication. Intercultural networks are less dense, less likely to be multiplex, more likely to consist of weak ties than strong ties, and have weaker effects on social relationships. Networks with many weak ties and social connections are more open and likely to have new ideas and seek new experiences than close networks with many redundant ties. In other words, a group of similar people (e.g., culturally similar) who have close networks and only interact and communicate with each other is likely to have the same and limited knowledge and opportunities. On the other hand, a group of people who have open networks, with connections to other social networks (e.g., culturally different social networks) is likely to have access to a wider range of information, more and broader knowledge, and opportunities.

Figure 3.5
Social Network Theory (SNT).
3.7 TAXONOMIC APPROACH (TA)

The Taxonomic Approach (TA) to intercultural communication (Sarbaugh, 1988) establishes similarities and differences among participants in communication. The degree of difference is referred to as the level of homogeneity/heterogeneity of the participants and is used to classify the differences along a continuum of homogeneity/heterogeneity. This continuum indicates the levels of interculturalness of communication (see Figure 3.6). When participants are highly homogeneous/similar in their (1) worldviews (beliefs about the nature of life, the purposes of life, people’s relationships to the cosmos), (2) normative patterns (beliefs and actions pertaining to what is involved in being a good person), (3) code systems (verbal and non-verbal codes, including time and space), and (4) perceived relationships and intent (compatibilities of goals, hierarchy of relationships, positivity or negativity of feeling toward the other person), then the level of their interculturalness is low, and communication requires minimal effort and is very accurate. On the other hand, when participants are very heterogeneous or different on the continuum of the above variables, their communication requires greater effort, and communication can be inaccurate.

The TA to intercultural communication allows for creating numerous combinations of variables from groups (1), (2), (3), and (4). Also, it is not just the presence or absence of difference that influences the intercultural communication, but the degree of difference. The amount of difference may range from undetectable to the most extreme. Differences might be small in one dimension of the taxonomy and large in another. The question is which differences on which dimensions have the most influence on communication outcomes.

A continuum of communication interculturalness

Least intercultural
(accurate communication)

Most intercultural
(inaccurate communication)

very similar

very different

worldviews
normative patterns
code systems
relationships

culture

Figure 3.6
Taxonomic Approach (TA).
3.8 ANXIETY/UNCERTAINTY MANAGEMENT THEORY (AUMT)

The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUMT) (Gudykunst, 1988) proposes that intercultural encounters, particularly in their early stages, are characterized by high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, especially when cultural differences are large. In order to communicate effectively, individuals attempt to manage their anxiety and reduce uncertainty about themselves and the people with whom they are communicating and interacting. The AUM theory shows what encourages and inhibits effective communication and what takes place during this communication.

The AUMT has its origin in the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), according to which individuals seek information to reduce uncertainty. Berger and Calabrese (1975) suggested that as levels of non-verbal behavior (e.g., showing warmth, smiling, touching, eye contact), information sought, intimacy level, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, and liking increase, uncertainty is reduced, and the amount of communication increased. The higher the similarity between individuals, the lower the uncertainty and the greater the amount of communication. Likewise, the higher the dissimilarity between individuals, the higher the uncertainty and information seeking and the lesser the amount of communication.

In a cross-cultural context, the AUMT (Gudykunst, 1988) refers to communication between strangers, usually those from different cultural groups. Individuals experience uncertainty because they are not able to predict others’ culturally determined attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. When the individuals experience uncertainty at too high a level, they feel uncomfortable and try to reduce uncertainty by searching for information about the strangers. They also may avoid encounters with strangers and even end the interaction. As a result, the individuals may develop stereotypes and use them to predict other people’s behavior. This leads to misinterpretation of messages and misunderstanding. On the other hand, when the individuals experience uncertainty and anxiety at too low a level, they may be bored and not pay attention to interaction with strangers. Consequently they may miss important cues and behave ineffectively. In general, effective communication is achieved when the levels of uncertainty and anxiety are between too high and too low. However, in interactions with strangers who are culturally different, the levels of uncertainty and anxiety are usually too high to achieve effective intercultural communication.

Several strategies can be used to reduce uncertainty, such as information seeking, controlling anxiety, or adapting to new situations and people. In terms of information seeking, people can adapt three strategies: (1) passive strategies - observe personally or through mass media or do nothing and hope that things will become clearer, (2) active strategies - seek information about others from outside sources (e.g., ask other strangers about the group), and (3) interactive strategies - seek direct interactions and communication with people about whom uncertainty exists to obtain information about them and be able to predict their behavior (Berger, 1979).

Figure 3.7 shows that intercultural communication is influenced by anxiety and uncertainty that in turn are influenced by a large number of variables, such as self-concept, motivation, cognitive capacity, social categorization, situational processes,
Figure 3.7
Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory (AUMT).
connections to strangers, and mindfulness. A change in one of these variables affects anxiety and uncertainty and thus intercultural communication. For example, having poor knowledge of locals and their traditions and customs, as well as experiencing foreign language difficulties, decreases a sense of security and emotional stability of tourists and make their intercultural interaction and communication with locals less effective. However, an increase in similarity, attractiveness, and liking of locals reduces uncertainty and anxiety of tourists and makes their intercultural communication more effective. In high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures, people are usually highly anxious about interacting with strangers, whereas in low uncertainty avoidance cultures people are not threatened by uncertainty and are willing and able to adapt communication when interacting with strangers.

### 3.9 STRANGER THEORY

The Stranger Theory (Gudykunst, 1985) is a sub-theory of Gudykunst’s AUMT (Gudykunst, 1988). The Stranger Theory claims that strangers are more inclined to notice and stereotype members of the host society. For instance, a stranger from the United States in Japan may claim that all the Japanese buy too many gifts. Strangers tend to overestimate the influence of cultural identity on peoples’ behavior in a host society, and disregard individual differences. As a result, cultural conflicts appear.

### 3.10 FACE-NEGOTIATION THEORY

According to a Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 1985), whenever two people from different cultural backgrounds meet for the first time, they develop feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. As a result, they develop strategies to avoid conflict that could be generated by these feelings. Members of collectivistic high-context cultures, who are concerned about others, saving mutual face and belonging to a group, try to avoid conflicts or seek compromise. People from individualistic low-context cultures who are concerned about the self, self-face, and independence, try to dominate and solve a problem.

### 3.11 INTERCULTURAL ADAPTATION THEORY (IAT)

Intercultural adaptation is the process through which people in cross-cultural situations change their behavior to facilitate understanding. In other words, intercultural adaptation refers to the adjustment of behavior to decrease the probability of being misunderstood by someone from a different culture. For example, a British conversing with another British can facilitate understanding by adjusting his/her communication style in response to perceived miscommunication. Adaptation that occurs between people of different cultural backgrounds requires more adjustment to reduce
miscommunication than adaptation that occurs between individuals of similar cultures. For instance, in conversations, people of the same culture may only need to repeat a particular sentence or word to understand each other, whereas people of different cultural backgrounds may need to use body language and other non-verbal cues to compensate for their inability to convey message through verbal means.

People adjust their behavior during initial stages of cross-cultural interactions, where there is a perception of "foreignness." If there is no perception of "foreignness," adaptation is not likely to occur. One may perceive the other person to be foreign based on that person's voice quality, skin color, or non-verbal cues. Also, if individuals believe that they are interacting with a person who is foreign, they usually perceive that they share limited or no knowledge with this person, including language, which will likely result in miscommunication. Thus, potential misunderstandings are usually occurring when interactants lack shared knowledge of each other. So, as perceived "foreignness" increases, perceptions of shared knowledge decreases, the probability of miscommunication increases and understanding decreases, and vice versa (Cai & Rodriguez, 1997).

The Intercultural Adaptation Theory (IAT) (Ellingsworth, 1988) describes the conditions under which individuals interacting in a new cultural environment make changes in their identities and behavior (adapt or not). The theory argues that the process of adaptation is goal driven; individuals are interacting and communicating to accomplish some goals. Various factors influence intercultural adaptation, including participants' motivation and power in the interaction (Ellingsworth, 1988) (see Figure 3.8).

According to the IAT, people adapt their behavior when they have a specific purpose in an interaction and are motivated to make it successful. If people have the same purpose (e.g., they need to cooperate or agree on something) they adapt their behavioral style, regardless of their differences. If both persons have the same purpose, then both persons adapt. However, if only one person has a purpose, then only that person adapts. Similarly, when one person has more power than the other (e.g., has a territorial advantage or more social status), then the other person adapts. The more the people adapt, the more they change their attitudes to and perceptions of themselves and others and the culture they represent. During the adaptation process people learn about themselves and others and modify their cultural perceptions and stereotypes. The knowledge they gained during the adaptation process influences their future intercultural behavior.

### 3.12 COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY (CAT)

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles, & Coupland, 1988) examines the way individuals change their communication style while interacting during cross-cultural encounters. The theory analyzes the motivations and consequences of what happens when two speakers change their communication styles. The theory argues that communication involves a constant movement
towards and away from others; people change their communication styles and try to accommodate or adjust their style of speaking to others. This can be done in three ways: convergence (decreasing communicative distance), divergence (increasing communicative distance), and maintenance (maintaining communicative distance) (see Figure 3.9). Communication convergence involves changing one’s linguistic behavior (language, dialect, speech style, vocabulary) or paralinguistic behavior (tone of voice, speech rate) to improve communication clarity and comprehension and decrease communicative distance and thus become similar in communication style to the partner and gain approval. The more a speaker converges to his partner, the more favorably the person is likely to be evaluated by the listener. Communication divergence involves the opposite: speakers seek differences between their communication styles to increase communicative distance and emphasize their uniqueness. The more a speaker diverges from his partner, the less favorably the person is likely to be evaluated. Communication maintenance refers to continuing one’s own speaking style.
The communication movement depends on the social and psychological contexts and communicators’ characteristics. For example, strong individuals or people with strong ethnic or racial pride often use divergence strategy to emphasize their identity. On the other hand, powerless individuals who have strong need for social approval use convergence strategy.

An expanded model of the CAT indicates that communication accommodation depends upon additional variables, such as situational factors, the interactors’ initial orientation, the social/psychological states of speakers, addressee focus, interactional strategies, reactions, and the evaluation (see Figure 3.9). Situational factors decide whether communication occurs in high-status and high-threat situations (business meetings) or low-status and low-threat situations (party with friends, vacations). Intercultural (intergroup) communication usually occurs in high-status and high-threat situations. In these situations people evaluate the behavior of others negatively and follow strict norms of group behavior. Social/psychological state refers to the speakers’ perceptions of the communication as having potential for conflict, and motivations to accommodate to others. Initial orientation refers to the differences in the way the individuals view their situation, either as being a member of a dominant ethnic majority or a subordinate ethnic group.

**Figure 3.9**
Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

Addressee focus refers to the way speakers pay attention to the needs or behavior of each other (e.g., conversational needs, skills, and competence of the partner). They can converge or diverge in their communication, depending on their needs. If they focus on the skills and competence of the partner, they can slow the speech, use more questions, and select familiar topics for conversations to ensure the partner understands what is said and achieve mutual understanding. If they focus on the partners’ conversational needs, they can share a topic of choice. If, however, they emphasize their roles in the communication, they may interrupt each.

Speakers’ reactions to one another modify the communication moves. When speakers seek social approval, focus on self-presentation or own social status or role-played in relations, they decrease communicative distance, and communication convergence occurs. When speakers desire to communicate their unique images, dissociate from the other speaker and emphasize differences between speakers (e.g., in experience, knowledge, status, style) they increase communicative distance, and communication divergence occurs.

Evaluations of the communication behavior (positive or negative) of the other speaker (accommodating or not accommodating) influence the changes in communication moves. These evaluations also have impact on future communication encounters.

3.13 COORDINATED MANAGEMENT OF MEANING THEORY (CMMT)

The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (CMMT) (Cronen & Shuter, 1983) is based on theory of Pearce and Cronen (1980) that argues that people who are interacting socially construct the meaning of their conversation and see the social world depending on specific situations and contexts. According to the CMMT, the meaning can be created and understood by attaining some coherence and coordination. The meaning can be created on six contextual levels: (1) **Verbal and non-verbal behavior**: how clearly people understand one another’s speech, gestures, posture, signals, eye movement, words, (2) **Speech acts**: the way meaning is attached to forms of address such as status or level of formality or respect, (3) **Episodes**: sequence of behavior, rituals, arrangements for eating, sightseeing, tipping, or gift giving, (4) **Relationships**: nature of social bonds, rights, and expectations, responsibilities, formation of friendships, development of business relationships, (5) **Life script**: the way people perceive themselves in action, their relationship to others and physical environment, social and cultural institutions, and (6) **Cultural pattern**: the way the larger community is defined, what is perceived as honesty, guilt, justice or equity within a society, freedom of speech, spiritual beliefs, attitudes to gender (see Figure 3.10). These different contextual levels play key roles in how people create meanings and understand messages. People choose which contextual level is most important in the situation and behave accordingly. These six contextual levels need to be heeded in order to solve the problem of cultural misunderstanding. Successful cross-cultural
encounter and communication are characterized by understanding the exchanged messages at all levels. It is possible to analyze every single element of cultural misunderstanding at each contextual level.

### 3.14 CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY (CT)

Constructivist Theory (CT) argues that through processes of accommodation and assimilation to a new environment (e.g., new cultural environment), individuals develop new experiences, learn, and construct new knowledge. When individuals assimilate to a new environment, they incorporate their new experiences into their existing beliefs. When individuals’ new experiences contradict their beliefs they may change their perceptions of the experiences and knowledge of the external world. Thus, by accommodating to a new environment, developing new experiences and changing beliefs and the perceptions of how the world works, the individuals learn and construct new knowledge. They become richer, more understanding, and more open to the outside world.

### SUMMARY

Several intercultural theories can be used to explain communication behavior in international and global contexts. However, these theories are of Western origin. It is questionable whether they can be applied in all cultures. Each theory stands alone; no effort has been made to integrate them. There are many more variables that could be included in each model to explain the concept of successful intercultural communication and encounters. More theories from disciplines such as psychology, social psychology, intercultural communication, marketing, or management should be drawn to arrive at one intercultural communication and interaction theory that