

# Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Part 3

In our last two columns we began the discussion of cross-cultural interviewing and its implications relating to changes in normal behavior as a result of cultural differences. As we all know, behavior changes from person to person as a result of gender, upbringing, geographical, psychological, and sociological considerations. Variations in culture and level of assimilation into a new population can also result in a different behavioral norm.

## Personal Space

One common difference among cultures is the variation and protection of personal space. The idea of personal space was first introduced by Edward T. Hall in his 1966 book, *The Hidden Dimension*. We each regard the personal space surrounding us as our own. When others invade our personal space, it may cause us anxiety, discomfort, or even anger. According to cultural rules, people enter or withdraw from

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another's personal space according to subtle subjective rules they may not even be aware of.

Often the use of personal space identifies the relationship between two people. The innermost zone, the intimate, is reserved for close family members, small children, or lovers. The next zone is reserved for social activities, such as conversations and less intimate day-to-day activities. The third zone is used with strangers or new acquaintances where

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no definitive relationship has been established. The final zone extends to the horizon and is used in speeches and public places where no relationship exists with those present.

Personal space may change as a result of a relationship between two people, but it may also change as a result of the environment. Those people living in large densely populated cities tend to stand closer together than someone from sparsely settled locations. People living in India tend to stand much closer together than people residing in South Dakota. People generally spread out taking more space for themselves when the space exists. So we would expect culturally anyone coming from a rural area in a particular country to have a larger personal space than those crammed into large urban areas in the same geographic area. Cubans, Italians, and Arabs are used to much closer personal distances that might feel awkward to someone from the United States.

The individual status may also affect a person's use of personal space. Those individuals who are in positions of power or affluence tend to demand and use more space than those less powerful or fortunate. Clearly the cultural rules that exist may be subtle and require significant interpretation to understand them.

In many parts of Africa, families group together in communal compounds to support one another and care for their families. When these groups immigrate to the United States, they tend to follow the same pattern living together with extended family and friends. This is a common experience as other groups immigrate to the United States; they also tend to live together in certain neighborhoods because of the common bond of culture, food, and the language they share.

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## Posture and Gesture

Culturally there may also be significant differences in posture and gesture whose meanings do not necessarily cross cultural lines. One almost universal posture with a single meaning is placing the hands on the hips. This "arms akimbo" posture is almost universally interpreted as authority and an

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unwillingness to change one's position. This posture is generally meant to distance or intimidate another.

Male interviewers should also consider their posture when talking to members of the opposite sex. In other countries the way a male positions himself may be considered to be flirtatious or inappropriate when having a conversation with a female. For example, sitting with the knees apart may be viewed as putting themselves on display for the other person in the conversation. Women are almost universally taught to sit with their knees together or legs crossed when sitting.

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In many cultures showing the bottom of the feet is considered disrespectful. In the Middle East Muslims consider showing the bottom of the feet a rude gesture. In Japan authority is often shown by erect posture and placing the soles of the feet flat on the floor.

Culturally there may be "emblems" used by other cultures that differ significantly from those used here in the United States. Desmond Morris, the famous zoologist and behavioral observer, said that humans make at least 3,000 different gestures with their hands and fingers alone. However, he also noted that most people use only a small number of gestures on a regular basis. A number of studies have postulated that the use of gestures also helps people think and remember specific information.

Unfortunately, when people speak a second language they often use the gestures from their first language, which may make it difficult to interpret their true meaning. For example, some Hispanic teens when speaking English will shrug their shoulders conveying the meaning of "I don't know." In reality they likely mean, "I don't care" or "I don't want to talk about it."

Many of these gestures are called *emblems* since their meanings are well enough known that they can take the place of words. Some examples of emblems are shaking the head "yes" or "no," the shoulder shrug meaning "I don't know," or the wave of acknowledgement or greeting. Again, problems in interpretation can arise since the shake of the head may have the opposite meaning. For example in response to the question, "Did you have a good time on your vacation?," the subject shakes

his head "no" while saying, "It was absolutely awesome." Here the head shake means bewilderment or being astounded at the wonderful vacation. However, we may also see someone shake the head "yes" while responding negatively to stealing from the company. This incongruent behavior should appear as a red flag to the interviewer.

Desmond Morris researched the cultural and geographic origins of many emblems and their meanings in his book *Gestures: Their Origin and Distribution* (1979). Many of the gestures he describes were brought with immigrants as they moved to the United States and integrated into the mainstream American culture. There are number of similar emblems across cultures, so sometimes the gestures are the same or delivered with a slight variation to the gesture that changes its meaning entirely. The American "okay" emblem where a circle is made with the thumb and index finger is viewed in some parts of the world as a suggestion to perform a sex act on oneself.

## Interpreters

A good interpreter can help decipher the complexities of cultural variations and define the subtleties of communication with a culturally different person. It pays to spend time with the interpreter explaining what the interviewer plans on doing and what he is looking for during the interview. Many languages do not translate exactly or may have multiple words with slight differences in meaning, so it will be important for the interpreter to know what the interviewer is looking for in the conversation.

For example, during rationalization we would want the interpreter to select the word with the softest meaning, rather than the harshest. In part we also want the interpreter to be a translator giving us the exact language the subject uses, but including the same voice inflection, pauses, and word emphasis.

Many people who are thrust into the work as an interpreter speak the language with difficulty or have English as a second language. As a result the interpretation is just paraphrasing the general meaning of the individual's response.

The world and our own communities are laboratories for observation of the human creature and the culture in which he lives. If we have an employee population largely made up of a particular group, it would pay the prudent interviewer great dividends to pay attention to how these people stand, converse, and interact with others during day-to-day business. ■

### Following are useful reference books to consider:

- *When Cultures Collide, Second Edition: Leading Across Cultures* by Richard D. Lewis
- *Do's and Taboos Around the World, Third Edition* by Roger E. Axtell
- *Asian Crime and Cultures: Tactics and Mindsets* by Douglas D. Daye
- *Handbook of Asian American Psychology* by Lee C. Lee and Nolan W. S. Zane
- *Understanding Arabs: A Guide for Modern Times, Fourth Edition* by Margaret K. Nydell
- *Gestures: Their Origin and Distribution* by Desmond Morris