

Lecture Overheads: Communicating Across Cultures

Communication for Managers

15.279

Fall 2012

Effective cross-cultural communication means

Being able to recognize cultural variables



Understanding how those variables influence business



Maximizing that knowledge to minimize misunderstanding

The underlying premise

Differences in communication styles and norms arise from and are reflected in cultural beliefs, values, and experiences.

What is culture?

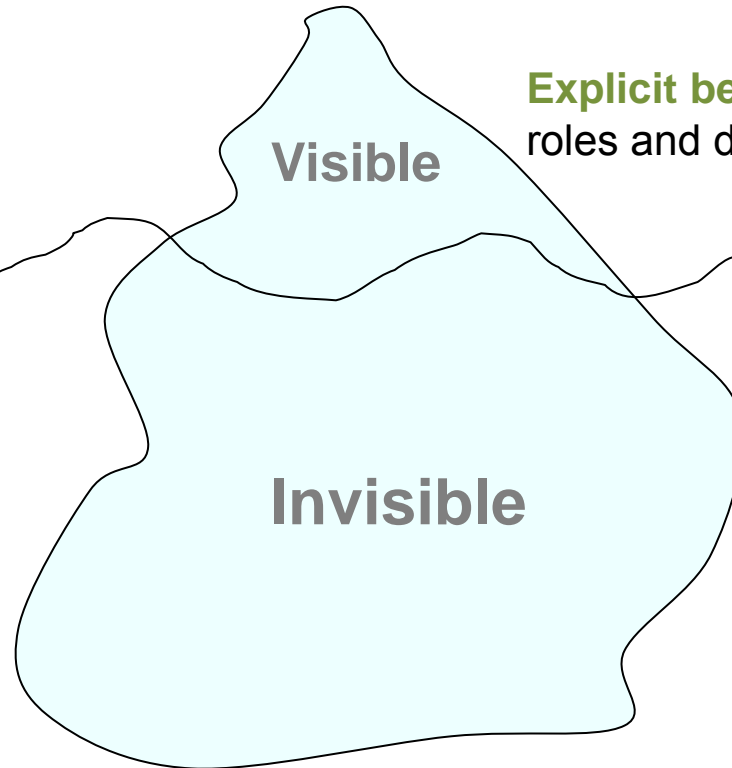
Concrete expressions: dress code, architecture, food, language, transportation, political system, legal system; “Culture with a big C”: language, art, music

Artifacts: working hours, business meetings, social events, rituals, jargon

Recognized behaviors: rituals and taboos

Explicit beliefs and values: social roles and duties

Underlying assumptions: unconscious perceptions, thoughts, feelings



Cultural forms: nature of time and space

Reactions to common human problems and questions

**But a caveat:
We need to talk
about and in
stereotypes.**

Stereotypes and necessary generalizations

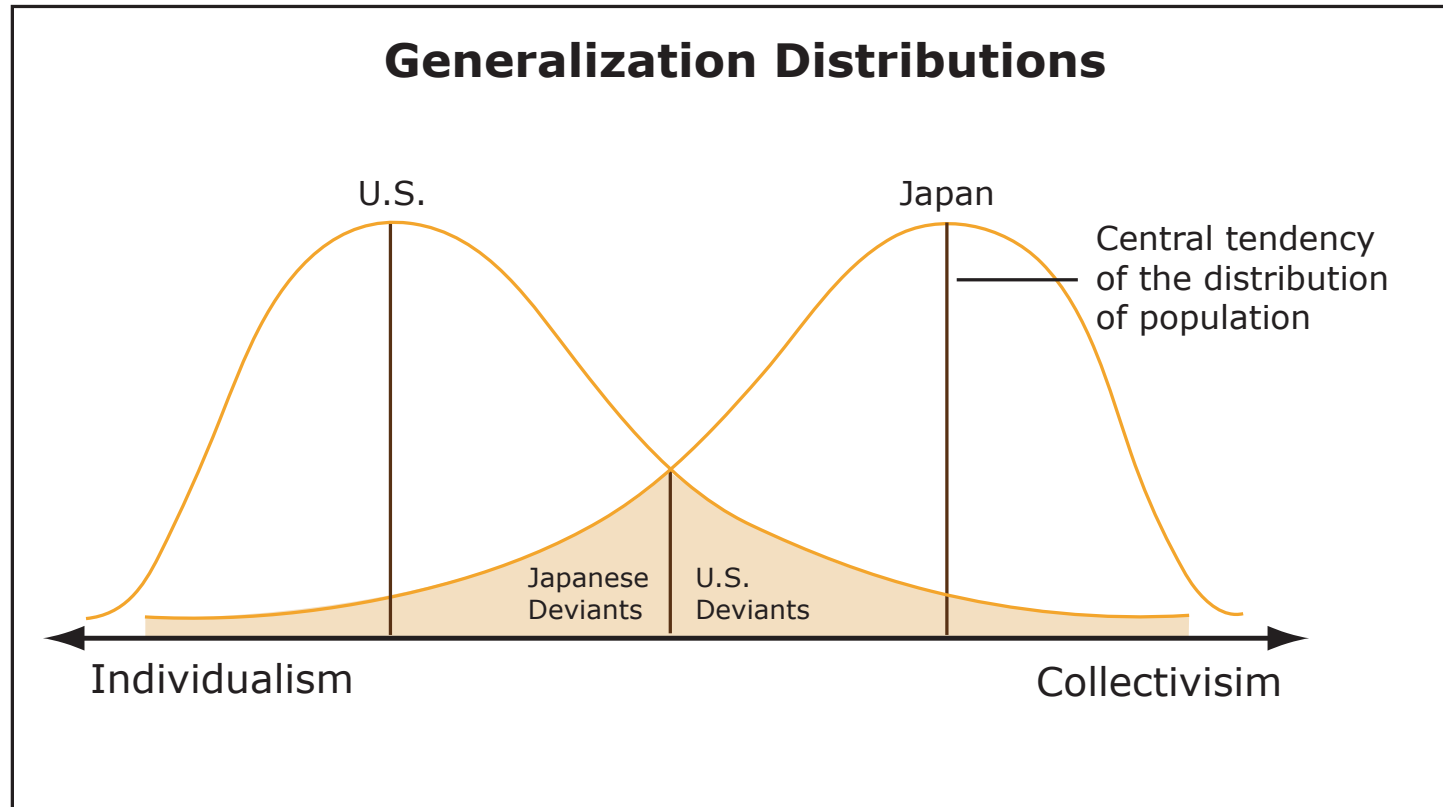


Image by MIT OpenCourseWare.

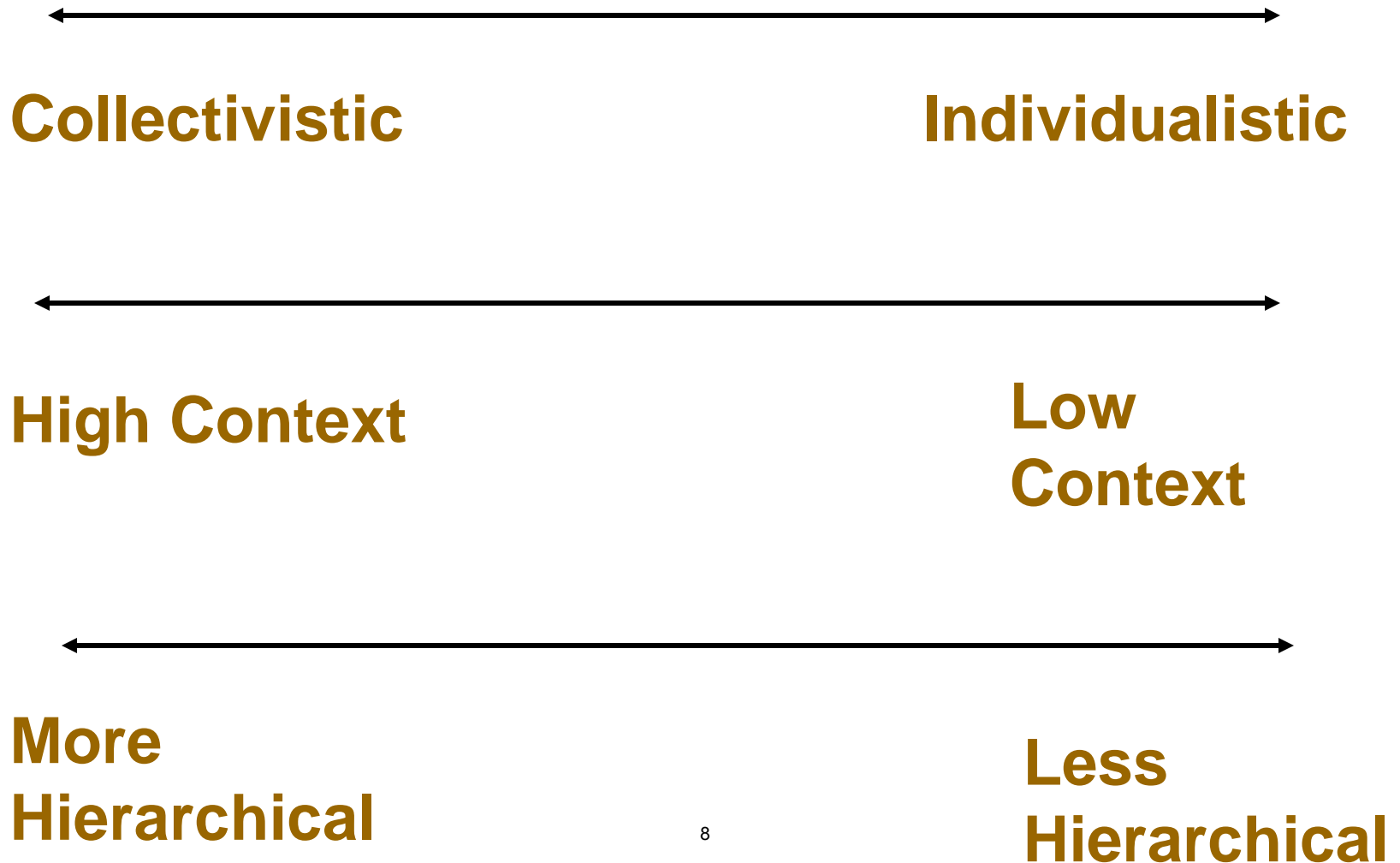
From: Milton Bennett, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings.*

Communication for Managers

Ways in which cultures vary

- Perceptions of time
- Perceptions of space
- **Individualism versus collectivism**
- **High context versus low context**
- **Importance of hierarchy**
- **Importance and rigidity of gender roles**
- Nature of change
- Nature of authority
- Humans' relationship to the natural world

Three cultural characteristics that impact professional communication



Communication variables: verbal

- Rate, volume, rhythm, intonation of speech
- Use of
 - Silence
 - Pauses
 - Laughter
 - Interruptions
 - Questions
 - Anecdotes
- Who dominates the conversation?
 - Rules for topic shifting and turn taking
 - Tolerance for simultaneous speech
- Forms of interaction
 - Ritual
 - Argument
 - Repartee
 - Self disclosure
- And, of course, content: What can and can't be discussed with whom under what conditions?

Communication variables: nonverbal

- Proxemics (perception and use of space)
- Kinesics (facial expressions, gestures, etc.)
- Chronemics (perception and use of time)
- Paralanguage
- Use of silence
- Eye contact
- Clothing and physical appearance

NOTE: When the nonverbal conflicts with the verbal, the nonverbal “wins.”

Communication variables: communication styles

Linear: Goes from point A to point B

Contextual: Moves in a more circular fashion

Direct:

Discusses problems openly
face to face

Expresses feelings relatively
openly

Questions answered with
“yes” or “no”

Face saving not very much of
a concern

Indirect:

Uses third parties to discuss
problems

Suggest rather than state
individual feelings

Often questions answered
ambiguously

Face saving a high priority

Differences in Men's and Women's Communication Styles

Men

Women

World View	Competition; key role as provider	Relationships; key role nurturer
Purpose	A series of negotiations for status & independence	A series of negotiations for closeness & consensus
Questions	Request for info./tactic to gain control	Request for info./tactic to keep talk flowing
Content	“Report talk”	“Rapport talk”

More differences

Men

Topics

Defined narrowly;
shifted abruptly

Inter- ruptions

“Verbal sparring”

Use of space



Take
relatively
open stance

Women

Defined gradually;
relate to last speaker

“Cooperative overlapping”



Take
relatively
closed stance

Photograph courtesy of [Ben Gilman](#) (left) and [Ed Yourdon](#) (right) on Flickr.

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How cultural differences can impact teams

Team members may differ in:

- their perception of the team's objectives
- the way they communicate
- how they view leadership
- work habits
- their manner of interacting with members of the opposite sex
- their level of formality with other team members
- their willingness to socialize with other team members

How cultural differences can impact professional interactions

- Either completing a task or building a relationship takes precedence
- Either the written word or the spoken word is more trusted
- Persuasion is based on facts or on the reputation of the individual
- Meetings are for exploring an issue or for demonstrating agreement

General guidelines for working cross-culturally

- Don't assume different is wrong, odd, or counterproductive
- Listen and observe
- Be curious
- Try to discuss differences but be respectful if other team members are not comfortable discussing them
- Push your own comfort level

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