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Intercultural communication within a Multigenerational Afghan Family

Intercultural communication is the sharing of information, knowledge, experiences, and sentiments by people of different cultures. “Communicating between cultures means the sharing and mutual understanding of different cultural backgrounds, preconditions and conditions of people linked together,”(Anthropos, 646).

Intercultural communication can be difficult due to the language barrier, processes accented speech, stereotypes, perception of appropriateness/inappropriateness, and the lack of mindful that exists. Researchers have noted to overcome such difficulties requires motivation, a positive attitude, communication skills of empathetic listening and instrumental expression,”(Young, Faux, 186). This paper focuses on the differences of cultural communication and competence in the United States and how it varies from the Middle East, more specifically Afghanistan. It will also reveal the intergenerational differences that exist among Afghan families and their generations.

There are many ways of defining communication competence. Competence in communication can be a person’s accomplishment of his or her communicative goals. “Wiemann considered competence equal to accomplishment or effectiveness, defining it as the accomplishment of interpersonal goals during an encounter by choosing from among communicative behaviors. Larson, Backlund, Redmond, and Barbour (1978) proposed that communication competence is the demonstration of the knowledge of suitable communication behavior in a given situation. And some such as McCroskey and McCroskey (1988) believed that individuals make communication choices according to their self-perceived communication competence, and these are such perceptions that determine their communication competence.”
A study was done to show the communication competence amongst the Iranian culture. Although it is not Afghanistan, the findings of this study maybe helpful in gaining information about communication competence in neighboring countries such as Afghanistan. This study had a sample size of 700 Iranian students, both male and female who ranged between the ages of 17-24 and were enrolled in a university in Tehran, Isfahan, Iran during the 2010-2011 academic year. The students were asked to communicate in several contexts such as public speaking, dyads, meetings, and small groups which students spoke Persian. A self-perceived communication competence was administered and translated. “The Iranian and U.S. people perceive their communication competence in the same way in public and meeting context. The results for dyad and group context are also in the same order as those in the U.S. findings for the sub scores relating to the receivers’ indicated similarities between the Iranian and U.S. communicators. The results also show that both cultures have more competent communication with friends than with strangers and acquaintance receivers.

After administering an interview with a 23 year old Afghan-American man he stated that he would prefer to communicate and disclose information to friends first before family due to the cultural judgment that exists. In other words, he said he feels that he would hypothetically need a friend’s advice before family in order to hear both sides and arguments where disclosing to a family first results in negative and judgmental vibes. The judgmental vibes come from the cultural differences that exist where Afghans can be close-minded. On the other hand, the mother said that she would disclose to family first because they are more prone to understanding based on having similar cultural values and being able to relate.

CAUSES OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
“Asian cultural norms differ from Western norms with respect to the use of direct and indirect communication styles. In a study by Gudykunst (2001) that compared Asian Americans with European Americans, Asian Americans used a more indirect communications style that included an emphasis on maintaining interpersonal harmony, whereas European Americans used a more direct communication style that is characterized by being dramatic, open, precise, and contentious” (Kim, Park 269). According to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001), the majority of intercultural conflicts that occur in everyday situations consist of minor miscommunications, such as clashes between clients and merchants or between colleagues in a work environment. Conflict is also a result of the lack of having a sense of belonging with a group. Researchers have said that identifying with a group is a complex problem that hinges on multiple contextual and historical facts. It is when groups that are in contact that differ with respect to language and linguistics. “Language is not only an instrument of thought and communication but it also becomes critical to identifying group membership,”(Rubenfeld, Clement,1205).

From the interview conducted with the Afghan members, almost all members, especially the parents who emigrated from Afghanistan agree that language plays a big role and can easily be misinterpreted due to the cultural barrier that exists. For example, in Middle Eastern countries women are not typically placed on the same spectrum that men are placed on. Women in Afghanistan lack universal human rights such as freedom of speech, education, consent to marriage and more. As a result, communicating with a person with different beliefs could potentially be a misunderstanding of cultural competence. “The natives may sometimes lack empathy and mindfulness and, thus, quickly label the sojourners’ behaviors as inappropriate, and stereotype the sojourners as outsiders” (Devine, 1989; Kim, 2004). The Afghan-American man
also stated that communicating effectively comes with more barriers because he has to work harder and smarter in order for communication to not be misinterpreted.

HOW TO FIX

With a mediator involved, a conflict could be easily reduced by facilitating positive intercultural relations. More so, the mediator can act as a bridge that has developed shared understandings, and linked the cultural differences, misunderstandings, and disagreements. “The cultural mediator is a social agent who designs and puts in place devices that make it possible to restore meaning where meaning has broken off, namely, he or she provides the one who does not understand with the means to understand,” (Gohard-Radenkovic, Lussier, Penz, and Zarate p. 219).

INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Communication that takes place amongst members helps define a relationship. Intergenerational communication involves members in several generations communication with one another and being aware of each other’s changing needs and when needing support. The differences of age plays a great factor when it comes to intergenerational relationships with grandparent to grandchild as opposed to parent-child relationship. That being said, it’s not specifically the number that makes relating to one another so difficult, but much rather the experiences of the person throughout a lifetime. For example, after conducting an interview with an Afghan family, the mother being an immigrant has a harder time seeing eye to eye with the child who was born in the United States when it comes to relationships. In the Afghan culture, the mother was raised to understand that you don’t date men throughout your lifetime, but much
rather marry one man of the parent’s choosing. The child being educated in the United States and influenced by peers, the world and the media may see that there is nothing wrong with dating people to see who is fit to live with for a lifetime. Intergenerational understanding has to go both ways where the parent has to learn about the experiences and perspective of the child in which they are exposed to and vice versa. “Value conflicts are a normal part of adolescent-parent experiences in North America (Laursen et al. 1998), but may be more intense between immigrant adolescents and their parents (Kwak 2003) and greater in more recent immigrant families (Chung 2001). Children have been found to learn the language, navigate the systems and endorse the values of the new culture more quickly than their parents (Birman 2006; Ho 2010; Lau et al. 2005). These so-called “acculturation gaps” (Dennis et al. 2010, but see Bhatia and Ram 2009 for a critique of acculturation theories) are thought to underlie children’s complaints that parents place inappropriate restrictions on their behaviour, and parents’ concerns around children’s excess freedom in the new country, inappropriate behaviours around clothing and dating, and loss of the language and values of their heritage culture” (Birman 2006; Este and Tachble 2009a, 2009b; Szapocznik and Williams 2000).

Similarly, first- and second-generation immigrant groups tend to achieve better educational outcomes than later-generation groups (Department of Education, 2013; cf. Greenman, 2013). When the intersectionality of ethnicity and immigration generational status is considered, research has shown that such a inconsistency in education is due to specific reasons for moving to the U.S. (e.g., pursuit of higher education rather than reunion with family members), a selective pool of more advantaged individuals from Asian regions, and specific characteristics (e.g., hardiness, higher educational aspirations, optimistic outlook on immigration, and greater effort on educational endeavors) of early immigrant groups that lead to
their greater educational success. For example, the immigrants from Afghanistan did not have the same high level education that was offered to the Afghan-Americans.

A majority of existing research on the associations between parent–offspring relationships and offspring’s psychological functioning has focused on the normative family and developmental processes, such as separation-individuation and intergenerational conflict that typically occur during early adolescent years through young adulthood (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009; El-Islam, Abu-Dagga, Malasi, & Moussa, 1986; Koepke & Denissen, 2012; Robin & Foster, 1989; see Laursen et al., 1998, for meta-analytic review). The findings shows that conflicts such as age to date, curfew, allowance occur on a daily bases that challenges family boundaries and differentiates the “I” from “we”. As offspring successfully negotiate age-appropriate autonomy and differentiate from the family, it typically marks their maturity (cf. Choi, 2002), and therefore these conflicts are considered normative to the developmental trajectory across ethno cultural groups. In other words, according to the Afghan family, the mother and daughter have conflicts occur on a daily basis regarding curfew and when it is appropriate to date, where work/study. The mother being very old fashioned believes that she has the right to control her daughter, however, the daughter does not meet eye to eye because she believe that in America she is the legal age to have her freedom and do as she pleases. As a result, the relationship between the mother and daughter is not strong.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the point of this paper was to inform regarding what is intercultural communication and competence and tie it to how Afghans and Americans being affected differently. Furthermore, results have showed that culture plays a huge role in how one
communicates. After conducting interviews with Afghans, the outcome reveals that each generation communicates differently based on perspective, culture, and influence.