On January 9, 1991, the Foreign Minister of Iraq, Tariq Aziz, and the Secretary of State of the United States, James Baker, met in Geneva, Switzerland, in a last-minute effort to avert the war between the two countries. Seated next to Tariq Aziz was the half-brother of Iraq’s President, Saddam Hussein, who kept calling Saddam to give him an evaluation of what was going on. Baker who used the verbal channel of communication exclusively, stated very clearly: “If you do not move out of Kuwait we will attack you.” Saddam’s brother, however, paid most attention to the nonverbal forms of communication. He reported that Baker was “Not at all angry. The Americans are just talking, and they will not attack.” As a result Saddam instructed Aziz to be totally inflexible, and give nothing. Six days later, to Saddam’s great surprise, operation Desert Storm was unleashed. It devastated Iraq, killing untold thousands of people, and causing about $200 billion in property damage. That was some cross-cultural mistake!

Not paying attention to the way culture influences social behavior is usually a mistake. In this chapter we will describe some of the ways culture affects social behavior, and make you aware of how things can go wrong if you do not pay attention to culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

The Iraqi example reflects one kind of cultural difference in social behavior: the relative importance of context. Cultures vary in how much people pay attention to the context rather than the content of what is said. Context includes level of voice, looking or not looking into the eyes, the distance between the bodies, the posture and orientation of the bodies, the extent to which one person is touching the other, and what parts of the body are being touched. Had Baker not been a perfect gentleman, he would have taken the Geneva Telephone Directory and aimed it at the head of Aziz, he would have looked fierce, banged the tables, and shouted; and there would have been no misunderstanding! But, that would have deviated from diplomatic behavior. In any case, it is very difficult for a person to change behavior so radically in order to conform to the expectations of persons from other cultures. The best we can do is to teach people to go part way in the direction that the others expect.

Context cultures are found mostly in societies that are homogeneous, relatively simple, and where people have to maintain long-term good relationships with others. Japan is a good example. In Japan people will rarely say “no.” They are more likely to
take a deep breath, to frown, and to say "That is difficult." Saying "no" can make the other person lose face. They are quite concerned with saving both their own face and the face of the other person.

In other cultures people are even more subtle. For example, in Indonesia, a lower-class man and an upper-class woman met secretly and got to the point where they wanted to marry. They informed their parents, and following protocol the man's mother visited the woman's mother. The latter served her tea and bananas. Since tea is never served with bananas, that was a “dissonant” stimulus that said “no,” without actually saying the word. Both women saved face.

In contrast to high-context cultures, we see low-context cultures, such as Switzerland, Germany, and other West European countries. The United States is a low-context culture also, but people do pay some attention to nonverbal cues. It is not as extreme a low-context culture as is Switzerland. Low-context cultures are nontraditional. Since people generally do not know each other very well, they have to spell out everything clearly and explicitly.

Four Types of Social Behavior Patterns

Four kinds of social behavior patterns have been identified across cultures (Fiske, 1990). Community sharing is a pattern where people know each other very well. Family life is the closest metaphor. What is mine is yours, intimacy, oneness, cooperation, and self-sacrifice within the ingroup (family, band, tribe) are typical behaviors. Authority ranking is the second pattern. The relationship between a general and a soldier is the closest metaphor. Obedience, admiration, and giving and following orders without questioning are the typical behaviors. The third pattern is equality matching, and the best metaphor is social behavior between totally equal friends. You go through the door first this time, and I go through it next time. Taking turns, dividing equally, one person one vote, are some of the typical behaviors. Finally, market pricing, the fourth pattern, is best described by the market. You pay and you get some goods. If it pays to be your friend, I will be your friend. If it costs too much, goodbye.

Collectivism and Individualism

Every culture is characterized by a combination of emphases on these four social behavior patterns. However, there is a tendency for cultures in traditional societies, and especially in East Asia, to emphasize the first two patterns, and cultures in North-Western Europe and North America to emphasize the third and fourth patterns. This is the contrast between collectivist and individualistic cultures. It is also the contrast between cultures that are simple and homogeneous versus cultures that are complex and heterogeneous.

In complex, heterogeneous cultures (e.g. modern, Western, industrial) there are many groups to which one can belong. There are a myriad of “in-groups,” that is, groups of people with whom an individual experiences some “common fate.” One might join these ingroups if it “pays” to do so, and if the “costs” are not excessive. Joining is an individual decision, and the cultural pattern is individualism.

In homogeneous, simple cultures (e.g. subsistence farmers) there are not many choices about joining groups. One is more or less stuck with one’s extended family and a few friends. So, the group is extremely important to the individual. The individual does what the group expects, and the cultural pattern is collectivism.

Some aspects of the environment make people pay a lot of attention to their ingroups. If people have only a few groups to which they can belong, and have to cooperate with those groups in order to survive, as happens when people must dig large irrigation canals, build big protective walls, or share the products of their hunting with their extended family, they become collectivists. Specifically, in many cultures when people hunt they kill an animal only once every three or four days, and since there is no refrigeration they must eat it soon or it will spoil. One way to ensure that they have something to eat every day is to share what they kill, since the others share as well. Collectivism also emerges in situations where people do not eat what they grow in their garden, but give it away, while their relatives and friends give away what they grow. Again this system protects people from poor crops and bad weather.

But hunters are less collectivist than agricultural people, because the latter must stay on the land, and can not walk away from their ingroups, while the former can do so. So, hunters are a shade more individualistic than subsistence farmers.

When people are affluent, they can “do their own thing” and no group can tell them what to do. Affluence is a major determinant of individualism.

The contrast between collectivism and individualism is one of the most important cultural differences in social behavior (Hofstede, 1980;
Triandis, 1990). Collectivists pay more attention to context than do individualists. But there are many other differences as well.

The contrast between collectivism and individualism is one of the most important cultural differences in social behavior.

**Sense of Self**
First, people cut the pie of experience differently if they grow in a collectivist rather than an individualistic culture. In a collectivist culture they think of themselves as embedded in a collective (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In an individualist culture they tend to think of individuals as autonomous entities. Consider this: in traditional parts of Indonesia people do not use "personal names," but rather they use *teknonyms* (the equivalent of "the second son of the Smith family"). In other words, the person is not treated as an autonomous individual but an appendage of the group, in this case the family.

In studies in which we asked various samples of individuals in different parts of the world to complete 20 sentences that start with "I am...", we found that in collectivist cultures many of the sentence completions implied a group. For example, "I am a son" clearly reflects family; "I am Roman Catholic" clearly reflects religion. On the other hand such statements were rare in individualistic cultures. In individualistic cultures people referred mostly to their personal traits and conditions, e.g. "I am kind" or "I am tired." If we take the percent of group-related answers obtained from Illinois students as the basis, we found students of Chinese or Japanese background in Hawaii giving twice as many group-related responses, and students in the People's Republic of China giving three times as many such responses.

**Determinants of Collectivism-Individualism**
The United States is one of the most individualistic countries in the world. The reasons for this are because it is rich, its people have much social and geographic mobility (which allows them to leave their in-groups), and its people are exposed to very individualistic mass media. Most urban, industrial societies are rather individualistic. Europe is about as individualistic as the United States. But Japan is not as individualistic as Europe, because while it is very complex, it is also rather homogeneous.

Homogeneous cultures tend to be collectivist. In homogeneous cultures people can have large areas of agreement concerning what behaviors are expected under what conditions. Norms of behavior are clear, and imposed with great certainty. Norms are also very important when the population is dense, since people have to learn to avoid running into each other. Japan is dense, so the rules of good behavior are very well spelled out. People are quite concerned about acting correctly.

In fact, many of the traditional Japanese ceremonies can be seen as exercises for learning correct behavior. The tea ceremony, for instance, involves people sitting in a row, according to the status of each, while a cup of bitter tasting tea is first given to the most important person who after drinking a little offers it to the next most important person, who also drinks a little and offers it to the next most important, and so it goes.

Each time the tea is offered the person refuses, so it must be offered repeatedly until the person accepts it. This ritual goes on until all have had some tea. The symbolism is very clear: we are all one group, we are together, but there is hierarchy, and we must act according to the rules. The ceremony can take more than an hour, and during that time one is supposed to admire the tea pot, the tea cup, the wall hangings, and other art objects; and enjoy the peaceful sound of water being poured, and experience great serenity. It is good discipline for learning to sit and behave properly and to pay attention to rank.

**In Collectivism Behavior Reflects Norms**
In collectivist cultures one does what the ingroup norms specify. One is very sensitive to what the group expects. Success is often attributed to the help of others, and failure to one's own lack of effort. In contrast, in individualistic cultures behavior reflects attitudes. People often attribute success to their own intelligence, while failure is seen as the result of the difficulty of the task or bad luck.

**The Importance of Harmony**
When there is conflict within the ingroup, in collectivist cultures people try to paper over it, and show calmness and decorum. But if they are dealing with an outgroup they can express their anger freely.

When they disagree with another, they are likely to act "correctly" while at the same time thinking how to change the situation. Thus, indi-
individualists are likely to see them as insincere, because they do not present to the "outside" what is "inside." The correct evaluation of this behavior, however, is that, for the collectivist, "virtue," in the form of "proper action," is of the greatest importance. What an individual thinks is of no great importance when the group is all important.

On the other hand, the individualists express their dissonant views very clearly, and that makes the collectivists feel that they are outgroup members. The individualists often are much more concerned about what others think (e.g. Do you believe in God?) than what others do (e.g. if they cross the street against a red light, they just take personal chances and if they get hit that is their business).

**Attitudes**
The attitudes that collectivists endorse stress interdependence. For example, they agree that children should live with their parents until they get married and that older parents should live with their children until they die. On the other hand, the individualists stress independence from in-group others (e.g. I do my own thing and most members of my family do the same).

**Goals**
When the goals of the ingroup and the individual are in conflict (e.g. old parents require an action that interferes with one’s career), the collectivist finds it natural to use the in-group goals, and the individualist to use the personal goals.

**Values**
The values stressed by collectivists are security, obedience, duty, ingroup harmony, hierarchy, and personalized relationships. The values stressed by individualists are pleasure, winning the competition, achievement, freedom, autonomy, and fair exchange.

**Calamities**
The worst thing that can happen to a collectivist is to be excluded from the ingroup; the worst thing for an individualist is to be dependent on and to have to conform to the ingroup.

**Social Behavior**
In collectivist cultures people interact very frequently with large groups of ingroup members and know a lot of them very well, but they know very little about outgroup members. In individualist cultures people have many relationships with a wide circle of people, but they do not know very much about any of them.

When there is a clash between vertical (e.g. parent to self) and horizontal (e.g. spouse to self) relationships, the collectivist considers it natural that the vertical relationship will have precedence; the individualist that the horizontal will have precedence.

Social behavior between an outgroup and ingroup member is very different in the case of collectivists, but not too different between individualists. In fact, individualists are often proud that they do *not* favor the ingroup—say in job selection or promotion. Collectivists think that it is natural that one should favor the ingroup.

The rights of the individual are important in both cultures, but if they conflict with the perceived well-being of the group, the collectivist finds it entirely natural to ignore them. The individualist gives great value to individual rights, and will not sacrifice them for the benefit of a group.

Since collectivists are very close to their ingroups, it is difficult to become close to them. However, if one is accepted by the ingroup, it is very easy to get to know them. In fact, once you are an ingroup member, they will ask you all sorts of "indiscreet" questions (e.g. How much money do you make? What kind of sex life do you have?).

Individualists are very easy to get to know, but one rarely asks or answers such indiscreet questions about any ingroup members. The relationship is "correct" but not close. Individualists figure out "how much do I profit from this relationship?" and "what are the costs of this relationship?" and arrive at a calculation on whether to continue it. Collectivists feel very close to their ingroup members and are willing to sacrifice for them; they do not compute the costs of the relationships.

When choosing a mate, collectivists think about "a good job," "chastity," "loyalty," and "togetherness" while individualists think of an "exciting personality," "physical attraction," and the "fun we can have together."

**Evaluation**
There are indications, not yet fully supported by research, that the confrontations so important to the individualists increase the frequency of heart attacks. The narcissistic individualism of many in the United States neglects the public good (Bellah et al., 1985).
The poor academic achievement of U.S. students, the drug problem, and delinquency, may be linked to excessive individualism—too much emphasis on having fun. Consider this: The boat people who came from Laos and Cambodia, in 1979–1980, without much English, had children in 1983 who performed, on the average, at the top quarter of the U.S. norms in arithmetic and science. The explanation seems to be, in part, that the collectivism of these cultures helped them. The whole family was rooting for the child to do well in school. Several hours of homework, helped by older siblings or neighbors, prepared the child for excellence in school.

Individualism is good for creativity; collectivism is good in other ways. Each has much to learn from the other.

REFERENCES


