# ANXIETY AND UNCERTAINTY

# MANAGEMENT IN

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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## Introduction

Human nature takes comfort in the familiar, and the process of enculturation that everyone goes through as a child is the process of learning the implicit and explicit expectations of the society and culture in which the developing individual finds him or herself. Culture refers to the beliefs, values, and behaviors shared by people who identify themselves in some way as members of a definable group. Hostede defines culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or society from those of another" (1984, p. 89). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) define culture as "a script shared by a large group of people," and enculturation involves learning the script (the values, beliefs, behaviors, worldview, and preferences shared by the culture of which the developing person is a part). This script serves to guide our expectations in the interpersonal interactions in which each person knows his or her role. When people of different cultures, with different scripts, interact, the rules that have served to guide their expectations no longer hold, and this leaves them confused and anxious. This paper explores William B. Gudykunst's Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, which addresses this problem explicitly, and applies it to my experience living overseas and interacting with Colombian nationals of the dominant, Spanish-speaking culture, indigenous Colombians, and expatriates wanting to serve the people and share God's Good News.

## Discussion

AUM focuses on interactions resulting in effective communication between members of a cultural or co-cultural in-group and *strangers*, people who are not members of the group, especially in situations where interactions with strangers create or are rooted

in fear or suspicion (Griffin, 2003, p. 423; Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 30). In any

intercultural interaction, at least one person is a stranger. Strangers experience anxiety and

uncertainty when they do not know or understand what is expected of them in the

interaction—their cultural cues and scripts do not serve them as expected in the current

interaction. When people feel anxiety and uncertainty, they take steps to reduce these

feelings, resulting in behaviors that may be predicted in certain ways by the theory.

Martin and Nakayama state that "Gudykunst … stresses that the primary characteristic of

relationships in intercultural adaptation is ambiguity" (2000, p. 278). This ambiguity is so

important that Samovar and Porter quote Gudykunst as saying, "If the amount of

uncertainty present in initial interactions is not reduced, further communication between the

people will, in all likelihood, not take place" (2004, p. 285).

Anxiety and uncertainty are related aspects of this lack of shared scripts, and

Gudykunst believes they are the basic causes of communication breakdowns between

members of different groups. Uncertainty refers to cognitive differences—*thinking*

differently in similar contexts. Anxiety refers to affective differences—*feeling* differently in

similar contexts; one or more people are uneasy or worried because they do not know how

to respond when another person does or says something that would be "inappropriate" in

the first person's original culture. While some limited amount of anxiety produces a

motivation to succeed in the interaction, too much causes disrupts the communication, and

may produce a dysfunctional response known as "culture shock."

The notion of uncertainty grew out of Charles Berger's uncertainty reduction

theory; Gudykunst extended it and applied it to intercultural interactions (Griffin, 2003, p.

425). Gudykunst and Hammer (1988) is an early extension of Berger's theory to

intercultural communication. Beginning with several assumptions about strangers in a cross-cultural setting, it views the goal of strangers desiring effective communication to be one of understanding and adapting to the host culture. To this end, Gudykunst and Hammer propose 24 axioms and 50 theorems that provide directions and strategies for strangers to take to decrease their uncertainty and anxiety.

Martin and Nakayama (2000) describe ways that strategies for anxiety and uncertainty management differ between individualist and collectivist cultures, to use Hostede's terms (1984). The problem this paper addresses deals crucially with this distinction.

Colombian society (the dominant, Spanish speaking majority culture) is a highly stratified; collectivist culture. Though this stratified structure is diminishing in importance, it is still prevalent in the way people view their relationship with others. While the levels of social strata are largely defined by wealth and status, old money views itself as more highly ranked than the *nouveau riche*. Members of this dominant society (Colombians) view themselves as superior to members of indigenous communities, and generally treat them as inferiors. These indigenous communities are also collectivist cultures. Foreigners, especially North Americans, are assigned a status comparable to a moderately wealthy person, whether they have money or not. These expatriates are often individualists. When expatriate missionaries interacted with Colombians, there was often a paternalism rooted in ethnocentrism, and the Colombians tended to accept that attitude as they would from a higher status Colombian. When the missionaries interacted with the indigenous people to whom they had gone to minister, there was generally the feeling of being there to try to *help*. This often caused confusion and suspicion in the Colombians, who wondered why the

missionaries were *really* there, because few high status people would go live with *Indians*. This suspicion would often lead to misunderstanding and the misattribution of motives, i.e., the Indians must have something the Americans and the American government needed, something that the Colombians could not figure out or understand.

For their part, in some cases, the missionaries viewed interaction with Colombians as a distraction from their desire to help indigenous people and share the gospel with them. Often, these expatriates did not speak Spanish well, or understand Colombian customs and culture, making Colombians wonder how effective these expatriates could be in helping the indigenous people. These perceived deficiencies and unfulfilled expectations contributed to the uncertainty on the part of Colombians regarding the missionaries, and, as predicted by AUM, fueled suspicion and fear. Many of the missionaries had no close Colombian friends. This fits Gudykunst's (1992) prediction regarding the process of developing intercultural friendships in which he finds that the process of making friends of either one's own or of another culture depends on the emotion of satisfaction with the relationship. If there is a high degree of uncertainty or anxiety about the interaction, people are less likely to become friends. Collectivist societies tend to assign a higher degree of intimacy to friendships in the in-group. "In early stages of relationship development, we must rely on cultural and sociological data to predict another person's behavior because we do not have sufficient information to use psychological data in making predictions" (Gudykunst, 1992, p. 305).

Another important concept in AUM is that of *mindfulness*, which produces William Howell's third level of communication competence, a conscious competence in which we reflect on our communication processes and work at and consciously choose to make them more effective. Effective communication minimizes misunderstanding and is the result of

mindfulness. The choices we make to be more effective are aimed and reducing or eliminating the doubt or fear that develop from the inability to predict expected behavior (Griffin, 2003, p. 424). Gudykunst and Kim (2003, p. 38) point out that mindfulness does not come naturally, since we do not normally reflect on behaviors and attitudes that have become habitual. These habitual behaviors are scripted by our experiences and the "programming" of our minds through our cultures and life experiences. This reflection, or mindfulness, is similar to what Brookfield has in mind when he writes about critical thinking. Brookfield believes that critical thinking skills are some of the most important skills adults can develop to improve their ability to function successfully in the world. He defines *critical thinking* as "reflecting on the assumptions underlying our and other's ideas and actions, and contemplating alternative ways of thinking and living" (Brookfield, 1987, p. x). He views critical thinking as "one of the important ways in which we become adults." Wiseman also notes "that cognitive, motivational, and behavioral factors impinge upon one's levels of anxiety and/or uncertainty" (2001).

Gudykunst would view the problem posed here as a classic example of the problems that AUM seeks to address. Often when missionaries and Colombians interacted, they both viewed the other in ways that were not conducive to effective communication. The missionaries were not mindful of the effect their attitudes and actions had on Colombians, in whose country they were guests, and were not aware that these attitudes and actions induced the anxiety and uncertainty in their Colombian hosts that Gudykunst's theory would predict. Their lack of mindfulness of the fact that they were guests and their ability to effectively minister to the indigenous people they had gone to serve was impacted, and to some degree limited, by the suspicion their

obliviousness created. In their dealings with indigenous people, they tended to expend the effort to become more culturally sensitive and develop the awareness necessary to foster intercultural friendships.

Though written and extensively applied specifically in intercultural communication contexts, Gudykunst intends for the theory to be applied whenever interactions with strangers create or are rooted in fear or suspicion, thus making the theory applicable in intergroup as well as intercultural communication situations, which Gudykunst sees as different in degree rather than kind (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman, 1991, p. 273).

Thinking Christianly in this situation requires a consideration of the value and dignity of all people, and showing respect for all people, not just those who can further one's personal goals and objectives. In this case, I think that thinking Christianly coincides with Gudykunst's goal of increasing the effectiveness of the communication by reducing anxiety and uncertainty, increasing mindfulness, and reducing fear and suspicion. As we reach out to make friends of people of all other cultures with whom we come in contact, we open avenues to communicate God's love, and the possibility to share the gospel to all who need it, not just the ones to whom we feel especially called to minister. As we truly demonstrate God's love in our interactions, we find that God's love in and through us really does cast out fear. (1 John 4:18).

## Conclusion

This paper explored Gudykunst's Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory, which proposes that strategies for decreasing anxiety and uncertainty can increase effectiveness in communicating with people who have a different culture or worldview than oneself, and applied it to interactions of strangers with people of two different cultures

in another country. It concluded with the observation that thinking Christianly about the

dignity and value of all people in the sight of God can result in a changed perspective that

reduces anxiety and uncertainty and the fear that may result.

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