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CHAPTER 9

An Associative Approach to Intercultural Communication Competence in the Arab World

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Increasingly, the great diversity within the Arab world is finding scholarly expression in communication research across the region. A new generation of scholars is arguing that the Arab culture should no longer be seen as singular but rather as a group of diverse social customs representing a tapestry of cultures within the Arab world. These scholars have also highlighted the importance of the Islamic influence on sociocultural beliefs and behaviors. This chapter examines how these sociocultural and religious influences combine to form a prevailing view of communication and, by extension, communication competence. Despite the diversity found among Arab and Islamic societies, a common thread running through the intricately interwoven social fabric is the premium placed on relationships and context. This emphasis is used to propose an "associative" view of communication. This associative view of communication can be seen in the interconnected patterns and associations that run throughout the Arab world.

This chapter first explores the diversity that characterizes the people and societies in the Arab world. It then discusses the associative features found in communication within the region, specifically in terms of language, religion, and social norms. Discussion proceeds by outlining the features of intracultural communication competence to attainable goals of intercultural communication competence.

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The chapter concludes with special consideration for balancing tensions between individuality and individualism and the strong associative pull in the quest for intercultural communication competence in the Arab world.

A Tapestry of Cultures Within the Arab World

The complexity and diversity within the Arab world, as well as emerging contravening trends, have compounded the notion of "Arab culture." Traditionally, within the field of intercultural communication scholarship, scholars have tended to speak about the Arab culture in the singular. For example, Edward T. Hall (1958, 1966, 1976, 1990), often referred to as the "father of intercultural communication," used his training as an anthropologist to document communication behavior patterns across cultures. Hall frequently drew upon examples from the Arab culture to illustrate distinctions in intercultural concepts such as high-context and low-context cultures, as well as polychronic and monochromic cultures. In her review of intercultural scholars on the Arab culture, Feghali (1997, p. 351) found that the field "relied heavily" on Hall's work. While Hall's lucid prose and prolific writing helped give birth to the field of intercultural communication, his work relied primarily on cultural blocks such as the Americans, the Germans, the Arabs, and so forth. When contrasted against Western cultures, the Arab culture stood out as a distinctly different cultural block or undifferentiated cultural whole.

While this tendency to speak of the Arab culture as a monolithic cultural entity has been emphasized in the intercultural field and still maintains currency within contemporary intercultural writings, including introductory texts on intercultural communication, a new trend may be aloft. Increasingly, scholars within and outside the region are challenging the notion of one Arab culture (Ayish, 1998, 2003; Feghali, 1997; Iskandar, 2008). Rather than focusing on the outstanding differences between the Arab culture and other cultures, they are probing the critical distinctions among the Arab culture(s) or the array of cultures within the Arab world. In a recent discussion of Arab unity, Al-Jazeera English even used the phrase "Arab cultural systems." Understanding the distinction between Arab culture in the singular—versus Arab cultures in the plural—is a salient point of departure for developing intercultural communication competence.

The emerging distinctions between culture and cultures may stem in part from the difficulty in defining *Arab* (Feghali, 1997). As Almaney and Alwan (1982) noted, "The term 'Arab' becomes strange and baffling when you dig into just what it means . . . an Arab is not a race, religion, or nationality" (p. 30).

Arabs originated in the Arabia Peninsula (modern-day Saudi Arabia and Yemen) and were associated most closely with Bedouin tribal traditions (Ayish, 1998, 2003). The religion of Islam was also revealed in Arabia, and Arabic is the language of the Quran. With the spread of Islam, Arabs carried the religion and the language to South Asia, parts of Europe, and across North Africa (Chejne, 1965; Hitti, 1970; Hourani, 1992). A prominent early Arab scholar, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), who traveled from his native Tunisia to Saudi Arabia before settling in Egypt to write the

earliest history on the region (*al-Muqaddima*), detailed the cultural encounters between Arabs and non-Arabs (Ibn Khaldun, 1967). The intermingling of cultures—Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds, Berbers, and Nubians—is captured in the title of historian Albert Hourani's (1992) treatise, *The History of the Arab Peoples*. In the latter half of the 20th century, Arab culture was sometimes fused with "Arab identity" and its political associations of Arab unity and Arab nationalism (Barakat, 1993; Suleiman, 2003). During this time, language became the overriding definition of Arabs as a cultural group. As Chejne (1965) observed, "Both the Arabic language and the nationalist movement have complemented each other to such a degree that they could hardly be separated" (p. 459).

Today, the League of Arab States serves as the most frequently cited reference point for defining the Arab world and, by extension, culture(s) within the Arab world. This geopolitical and economic entity, originally established in 1945, now has 22 members. The members span Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt in North Africa (*el-Magrib* or "the West"); Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia along the Horn of Africa; Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East (often referred to as *bilad as-sham*, greater Syria, or the Levant); and Iraq and the Arabian peninsula, including Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (often referred to as the *khaleej al-Arabi* or the Arab Gulf). When one looks at the underlying factors that shape culture—language, religion, geography, historical political, and economic experiences—the rich tapestry of cultures within the larger brushstroke of the Arab culture is not only easy to see but also hard to ignore.

Linguistically, the 22 countries share a common heritage in the Arabic language. However, for many of the ethnic groups, such as the Kurds, Berbers, and Armenians, Arabic is a second or third language. Across the region itself, one finds a wide variance as well as commonality. Classical Arabic is the written language of the Quran. The original text, compiled shortly after the death of Prophet Muhammad, has been preserved for more than 1,400 years. Modern Standard Arabic (*fusha*) is the written form of the language used in official documents and written texts such as the newspapers, books, and magazines. While people throughout the Arab world learn to read and write Modern Standard Arabic, it is not normally spoken and, when used in daily conversations, sounds stilted to the native ear (Shouby, 1951, p. 285). Each region has its own version of spoken colloquial Arabic, which can vary dramatically in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions, and pronunciation. Words for daily items (i.e., towel, teapot, car) and foods (tomato, cauliflower, milk, bread) tend to be particularly tied to regional dialects.

Religion, another important feature of culture, reflects another aspect of the diversity found within the Arab world. While the dominant religion is Islam, the region encompasses a host of religions. This is perhaps not surprising given that the Middle East is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions, which at various points in history vied for dominance. During the Crusades, Christianity was the dominant religion, and large Christian population centers are found throughout Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria. Lebanon, in fact, recognizes close to 20 different religious sects.

Coptic Christians, a denomination of the early orthodox Christian church, are found in Egypt. Significant communities of Arab Jews reside in Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq. Muslim sects include Sunni, Shi'ite, as well as Druze and Alawite.

The religious diversity is perhaps more acutely reflected by the ethnic diversity. Tunisian scholar Mohsen Hamli (2005) pointed out that in 6 of the 22 countries, Arabs are a minority. Two million Assyrians live in Iraq and close to a million Assyrians in Syria. Assyrians have their own language and alphabet (a variation of Aramaic) and belong primarily to the Eastern Catholic Church (Nestorians). The Berbers in northwest Africa also have their distinct language (Afro-Asiatic linguistic classification) and traditional customs. Kurds represent another large ethnic grouping. There are more than 5 million Kurds in Iraq and up to 1.5 million in Syria. The Armenians, originating in south Caucus, number about 1 million and are spread from Egypt to Iraq.

Geographic differences also affect cultural traditions as well as the cultural pride found among the peoples in the region. The harsh environment of the Arabian desert, where one does not survive alone, spawned a nomadic Bedouin culture of fierce competition for resources and magnanimous hospitality (Hamod, 1963). The Fertile Crescent nurtured an agrarian-based society and, with it, an intense identification with the land (Zaharna, 1991). Differences are also pronounced between urban, city dwellers, and rural agricultural communities (Barakat, 1993).

Historical, political, and economic differences also play a role in distinguishing regions within the Arab world. Egypt and Iraq, for example, were home to two of the world's most prominent ancient civilizations. Syria and Iraq were home to the two major Islamic dynasties that fostered the spread of Islam from the Middle East across North Africa and into Spain. The wave of European colonialism that swept through the Arab world left a pronounced impact on language, customs, and political attitudes. Lebanon and Syria experienced the shortest period of colonial rule, about 25 years by the French, while Algeria struggled for 130 years to free itself from French control. The prevalence of English is the result of British colonialism in Egypt, Jordan, and parts of the Arab Gulf States. The continuing turmoil in Palestine has profoundly contributed to the politicization of Palestinian Arab culture. Economically, the region varies from countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Libya, which have been positively affected by the discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources to countries such as Egypt and Sudan, which struggle against mounting population pressures.

Against this admittedly brief backdrop, the great diversity found among the peoples of the Arab world stands out. Nydell (2005), a prominent writer on Arab culture, remarked, "One might wonder whether there is, in fact, such a thing as Arab culture given the diversity and spread of the Arab region" (p. 13). The notion of "Arab culture" is infinitely more complex than it is at first glance.

The Arab historian Walid Khalidi (1981) attributed the division and unity found in the Arab world to centrifugal and centripetal forces. The major centrifugal forces he cited—ethnicity and interstate conflict—are reflected in the region's diversity. Among the centripetal forces he cited that serve to unify the Arab world are shared common experiences of colonialism, Islam, Arabic, customs, and manners.

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These centripetal forces provide a basis for outlining the parameters of Arab cultures. The common struggle against colonialism, albeit several decades ago, reverberates today in the writings of Arab communication scholars (Iskandar, 2008). While there is religious diversity within the region, Islam not only is the dominant religion (estimates of 83%–90% of the population) but has experienced a resurgence of prominence across the region. Communication scholars have recently turned to Islamic teachings and prescripts to suggest Islamic mass media theories (Al-Barzinji, 1998; Hamada, 2004; Mowlana, 2000, 2003) and even normative Arab-Islamic communication theory (Ayish, 1998, 2003). The Arabic language continues to serve as a powerful, defining feature of the Arab world (Suleiman, 2003; Tamari, 2008). Finally, the customs and manners are of special import to our discussion of culture and intercultural communication competence.

Among the most frequently cited customs are those that relate to relationships (Almaney & Alwan, 1982; Hall, 1976; Nydell, 2005). The importance of relationships has been observed by professionals and scholars in communication-related disciplines. Business communication scholars have spoken of establishing positive personal relationships as a prerequisite for conducting business in the Arab world (Almaney & Alwan, 1982; Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004). Organizational scholars similarly link effective management practices in the region to one's ability to cultivate and manage relationships (A. J. Ali, 1995, 2005; Hutchings & Weir, 2006). Public relations scholars have proposed a distinctive Arab model based on relationship building, noting that the process involves "communication as a social ritual, rather than communication as transmission of information" (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2005, p. 342). Similarly, in a recent collection of public diplomacy essays, former U.S. diplomats who had served extensively in the Arab world all repeatedly emphasize the centrality of relationships (Rugh, 2004). As Ambassador Kenton Keith (2004) noted, "It is hard to overestimate the importance of personal relations in the Arab world" (p. 15). Lebanese sociologist Halim Barakat (1993) perhaps best captured the central importance of relationships in a region of great diversity in his book *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*. In speaking of an "Arab conscious identity," Barakat discarded the notion of "cultural uniformity" and instead emphasized the "plural unity" embedded in the "networks of human relationship" (pp. xi–xii). The importance of relationships serves as the springboard for the discussion of intercultural communication competence in the Arab world.

A Common Thread:
Associative View of Communication

While diversity may indeed magnify the difficulty of achieving intercultural communication competence in the Arab world, the importance of relationships and social context are pivotal communication components for navigating the region's rich cultural terrain. To capture the significance of relationships and social context, I propose an associative view of communication. From the associative perspective, the significance, meaning, and purpose of communication are derived from relationships

among the parties and the social context within which it occurs. This associative view of communication underlies the observations made by Western communication scholars and scholars native to the region. Let me speak first about the Western body of literature since it may be more familiar to the readers of this text.

Association is an underlying feature of Hall's (1976) notion of "high-context" cultures. Hall distinguished between high- and low-context cultures based on how much meaning is embedded in the context versus the code. Whereas low-context communicators tend to search for meaning in the code or message, high-context communicators search for meaning in the context or setting. The connection between meaning and context is one aspect of association. Hall's description of the speaker-listener relationship is similarly revealing of the associative perspective:

> When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly—this keystone—is the role of his interlocutor. (p. 98)

Association is also inherent in the depiction of Arab cultures as "collectivist" cultures. In collectivist societies, group goals take priority over individual ones. Individuals pay primary attention to the needs of their group and will sacrifice personal opportunities, placing a premium on group harmony, cohesion, and stability (Ting-Toomey, 1985; Triandis, 1995). The extensive family ties and tribal groupings in Arab cultures as well as deference to group norms are cited as major factors in classifying Arab culture as collectivist (Hofstede, 1980). On the basis of his research of several Arab countries, Hofstede (2008) found these countries ranked low on individualism (38 compared to a world average ranking of 64), which, he says, "translates into a Collectivist society . . . and is manifested in a close long-term commitment to the member 'group,' that being a family, extended family, or extended relationships."

When viewed at the cultural level and in comparison to other cultural blocks, the Arab world may reflect the Western-defined criteria of "collectivist." However, there is a caveat to Arab cultures as collectivist—namely, individuality. Condon and Yousef (1975) highlighted the critical distinction between individualism and "individuality"; although individualism may suggest independence from the group, particularly group pressures toward conformity, "individuality refers to the person's freedom to act differently within the limits set by the social structure" (p. 65). The scholars suggested that individuality may be more prevalent across cultures than individualism. Indeed, this may be the case for Arab societies.

Although they usually employ the term *individualism* instead of *individuality*, both Western and regional scholars have observed the phenomenon in Arab societies. Berger (1962, for example, observed among Palestinian Arabs both a collective, group orientation and a "deep sense of individualism" (pp. 274–275). Quandt, Jabber, and Lesch (1973) noted that Palestinian individualism is not expressed in the nonconformist behavior of Western individualism but in "demands for equality and reciprocity" (p. 80). Ayish (2003) called individualism "central values in the Arab-Islamic

worldview" (p. 85). He traces the "deeply ingrained individualism in Bedouin society" back to pre-Islamic traditions of honor, poetry, and courage. However, again, he notes that "unlike its conception in Western cultures, as a unifying concept that may set a limit to group involvement, individualism in Arab-Islamic cultures is composed of both individual and group identification" (p. 85).

The sense of individuality, and even speaking out against the collectivity, is evident in Islamic and cultural icons in the region. In the Quran, the idea of an individual proclaiming his or her belief in God, even at the risk of not only going against the group collective but being exiled from it, is exemplified in the related stories of the prophets (M. Y. Ali, 1934/2003). The prophet Noah is shunned and called a madman. The Prophet Abraham destroys the idols of his tribe and forsakes even his father. The prophet Lot is threatened for denouncing sin. These stories of earlier prophets give context to the Prophet Muhammad, who is persecuted by his own tribe, the powerful Quraish of Mecca, and migrates to Medina.

What is interesting about individuality is that it is rooted within the social context or group association. In the Arab world, individual dignity and honor, both critical individual attributes, are socially defined and ascribed. Thus, it may be an oversimplification to describe Arab cultures as "collectivist." Viewed from the outside at the cultural level, Arab cultures do appear to be collectivist. However, at the individual level, in terms of interpersonal communication, a more refined view would be strong individuality rooted in an associative social context. Ayish (2003), in fact, speaks of the tension created between asserting one's individuality and conforming to social pressures as the "individualism-conformity" dichotomy.

Both the Arabic language and Islamic religion are rich with examples that exemplify the associative perspective. The phenomenon of association within the Arabic language is evident on several levels. Arabic, as a Semitic language, has a three-consonant root stem. From this root stem, a whole series of associative meaning are derived. In English dictionaries, one looks up a word by the progressive sequence of the individual letters of the word—*language,* for example—l-a-n-g-u-a-g-e. The word *linguistics,* a very close associative meaning to language, has its own distinct sequential series of individual letters and is placed separately from the word *language.* For a nonnative speaker of Arabic, one cannot look up a word using the sequence of individual letters; one must first identify the three-consonant root stem, which, in turns, leads to words with associative meanings. For example, *k-t-b,* the root stem of "to write" produces associated words such as *maK-TuB* (a letter, something written), *maK-Ta-Bah* (an office or study, place where one writes), *correspondence* (exchange of something written), and so forth.

Reading written Arabic is also an associative process. In Arabic texts, vowel marks placed above and below individual letters in a word help clarify the word's meaning and function. Most children's books and primary school textbooks have these vowel marks. Part of learning to read Arabic texts is understanding the associations among the words and inserting the vowel marks. Most adult literature, including newspapers, magazines, books, and other written text, does not contain these vowel marks. The notable exception to this practice of omitting vowel marks in texts is the Quran, which has complete vowel marks so as to avoid misreading the text. The situation is much like how an English-language reader would determine

whether the word *present* meant a gift, an act of offering something, or a time reference: At *present*, I cannot *present* him a *present*. One determines the meaning of a word by its context within the sentence. As G. M. Wickens (1980) explains to nonnative speakers of Arabic studying the language, "The *writer* of Arabic does *not* ordinarily provide the reader with *any short vowels [i.e., vowel marks] at all*: it is the *reader's* need and duty to *supply* these" (p. 13). Wickens's observation about the writer-reader relationship parallels Hall's (1976) earlier observation about speaker-listener relationship: Communicative meaning is not isolated in the message but rather is embedded in the relationships.

Classical Arabic as illustrated in the Quran is highly associative in nature. The Quran, considered the highest literary work in the Arabic language, is replete with associative-based stylistic, linguistic, and rhetorical features. For example, the text in the Quran is not punctuated (the Quran was compiled in written form more than 1,400 years ago; punctuation is a relatively new phenomenon for Arabic text). Quranic text contains no periods, semicolons, question marks, commas, or quotation marks. One recognizes a question or statement by word cues, stylistic features, and context. The rhetorical devices in the Quran are also associatively based. The chapter on the Prophet Joseph (Sura Yusif) is illustrative of the detailed narratives with dialogue. Sura ar-Raham exemplifies the use of repetition, rhetorical questions, and juxtaposition of opposites. The most prominent devices are metaphors, analogies, similes, and parables (these terms in English refer to the Arabic word *methel* and are listed in English-language translations as *parables* in Quran indexes). As the Quran repeatedly states, it teaches by every parable. Two prominent examples are "the parable of light,"[1] which interweaves one intricate layer of metaphor upon another, and "the spider's house,"[2] which stands out for its elegant visual simplicity.

A final example of the associative strand in the Arabic language is the abundance of social greetings and ritualized responses that have been amply noted by observers of the region. Adelman and Lustig (1981) highlighted the "attention to polite interaction through elaborate and prolonged greeting rituals" (p. 352) as one of the dominant features in the region. "Handshakes can go on for minutes, while in prolix Arabic an exchange of polite questions and blessings can extend indefinitely," observed Iseman (1978, p. 51). Cohen (1987) referred to the "veneer of elaborate courtesy," calling the Arabic language a "social instrument—a device for promoting social ends as much as a means for transmitting information" (p. 31).

The strong associative strand running through the Arabic language is also mirrored in the Islamic religion or *deen al-Islam*. The Arabic word *deen* carries a different connotation than the English word *religion*. In the intercultural literature, religion or belief system is often distinguished from political system, economic system, or social system. In Arabic, the word *deen* is more holistic and encompassing than *faith* and refers to "a way of life." Writing from an Islamic perspective, Siddiqui (2000, p. 11) describes the encompassing meanings of *deen al-Islam* for believers: It is comprehensive (*deen al-kamilah*), elevates human nature to its highest potential (*deen al-fitrah*), advocates moderation and balance (*deen al-wasata*), presents a lasting upright value system (*deen al-qayyimah*), is based on a system of governance called "shura and mutual advice" (*deen an-nasihah*), and proscribes good manners and fair dealings (*deen al-adaab*).

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The Quran as a manual for a way of life focuses extensively on social relations. The first pillar in Islam is *at-tawheed*, which proclaims the oneness of God. This is very much a relational statement: Nothing can be associated with God. Within the Quran, a person's most important relationship is with God. In fact, one's relationship to God is presented as a higher or more intimate level of relations than that person's relationship to himself or herself. Prominent verses within the Quran include God being closer to a person than his or her own jugular vein or knowing what is in one's heart.[3] A person's relationship to himself or herself, what might be called intrapersonal communication, is a second level of relationships. A third level of relationships discussed in the Quran deals with intimate relations such as one's parents, siblings, spouse, children, and neighbors. Social manners and knowledge of appropriate behaviors are one of the three fundamental tenets of the Islamic conception of education (Kirdar, 2006). The most expansive relationship is man's relationship within *al-Ummah*, or the community of Islam. In his commentary on the Quran, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (M. Y. Ali, 1934/2003) points out that the overwhelming focus (first 14 of 15 parts) of the Quran is on the *Ummah*.

These levels of relationship or associations within Islam discussed in the Quran are echoed throughout Islamic practices. As an illustration, Ali's (2003, N. 5461) commentary draws attention to the graduations of social contacts from the individual to international level. The proscribed five daily prayers reflect man's intimate relationship with God. The proscribed weekly prayer (Friday at midday) encompasses one's intimate relations. The proscribed two Eid prayers expand to the larger community. The prayers offered during the Hajj, or pilgrimage, which gathers Muslims from around the world in Mecca, are relations at the level of *al-Umma*, or global community of Muslims.

Communication Competence: An Associative Perspective

The associative view—which puts a premium on relationships and social context— has several important implications for intercultural communication competence. However, before discussing intercultural communication competence, it may be illuminating to highlight some of the parameters of intracultural communication competence from an associative perspective. What are some of the salient communication features or skills that distinguish competent communicators across the Arab world? A first component is linguistic ability. Throughout Arab history, eloquence has been highly prized—and this is evidenced through pre-Islamic poetry, the majesty of the Noble Quran, and public speeches of contemporary Arab leaders. Hamod (1963), who provided an historical overview of the development and changes in Arab rhetoric, highlighted the importance of eloquence:

> The linear equation was as follows: He who speaks well is well educated; he who is well educated is more qualified to render judgments and it is his advice we should follow. Eloquence and effectiveness were equated. (p. 98)

Although there has been a relative shift in the extent of embellishment, particularly with the transition from classical Arabic to Modern Standard Arabic, eloquence has remained central to communication proficiency and stature (Ayish, 1998; Chejne, 1965), and emotional resonance has remained a central component of eloquence (Hamod, 1963; Prothro, 1952). An eloquent communicator has the ability to use language to emotionally connect and stir the hearts and imagination of others.

Linguistic ability is evident on a second level in terms of social greetings and compliments. The Quran specifically addresses social greetings by admonishing believers to return a greeting with one that is better or at least equal.[4] A competent communicator stands out for his or her ability to distill the emotional mood and significance of social events into a well-crafted greeting or compliment. A relatively simple yet illustrative example can be seen in what one says after finishing a cup of coffee. Rather than offer a simple "thank you," a skilled communicator would use any news gained during the social visit to finesse his or her compliment and returns the cup to the tray, proclaiming "in celebration of your son's wedding," or "for the success of your children's exams."

Another dominant language skill exhibited by adept communicators is their sensitivity to and knowledge of dialectal differences of spoken colloquial Arabic—and ability to code-switch between their own native dialect and that being spoken. Again, whereas Modern Standard Arabic may be readily comprehensible, regional and even local dialects within a region can vary considerably. To appreciate the extent to which colloquial dialects differ and the difficulty that this linguistic skill presents even for native Arabic speakers, one can draw analogies to Latin. As Shouby (1951) explains,

> This situation [gap between literary classical Arabic and colloquial dialects] is a strong reminder of medieval Europe, when educated people wrote and read Latin but spoke the different dialects which later developed into what are now the various European languages. (p. 286)

In some respects, colloquial dialects reflect the phenomenon of expressing individuality within the larger (Arabic language) collective. One may use the vocabulary or idioms of a regional dialect to define one's self, create bonds of shared identity with those familiar with the dialect, or draw boundaries with others unfamiliar with the dialect. A skilled communicator is distinguished by his or her knowledge and familiarity with the wide array of regional dialects and ability for what might be viewed as code-switching to strengthen relational bonds.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, many of the normative or exemplary nonverbal behaviors (manners or *adab*) of skillful communicators are specifically mentioned in the Quran and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. Modesty and humility are repeatedly stressed as the guiding features of exemplary behavior. This includes modulating one's voice and even being soft spoken. In contrast, arrogance—overt displays of confidence, brash behaviors, and speech—is soundly denounced and associated with evil. The most prominent examples used in the Quran to underscore the disdain of arrogance are the stories of Iblis (the devil) and the Egyptian Pharaoh.

A final expansive category of communication skills are those associated with building and maintaining social networks. The founding Arab sociologist and historian Ibn

Khaldun linked the strength of human social organizations to the concept of *asabiyah*, or "solidarity," "group feeling," or "group consciousness." *Asabiyah* could be built within a tribal clan or politically across an entire geographic region. On an interpersonal level, a competent communicator uses the various verbal and nonverbal skills to define, enhance, and manage relations (Yousef, 1974). To extend relationships, the competent communicators demonstrate knowledge of intra- and intergroup dynamics and maintenance strategies. The skill sets used to build internal group solitary and expansive networks of alliances include mediation, negotiation, consensus building, and compliance-gaining skills.

Intercultural Communication Competence: An Associative Perspective

This rough, preliminary sketch highlights some of the distinguishing features of intracultural communication competence found within Arab societies and provides a benchmark for intercultural communication competence. The premium placed on relationships and social context has several important implications for intercultural communication competence.

First, and most immediate, is the need to adjust one's approach in terms of the level of interaction as well as analysis. There is sometimes a tendency in the study of intercultural communication to speak in broad generalities, such as "communication between cultures" or between Arabs and Americans. While this macro-level perspective may provide a vantage point for viewing larger cultural patterns, it may leave individuals seeking communication competence at a disadvantage. The premium placed on relationships and social context within Arab societies necessitates a micro- or individual perspective and a relational-level analysis. It requires what Spitzberg (1989, p. 261) identified as an interpersonal approach to intercultural communication.

At the interpersonal level, relationships are immediate and personalized to the individual with whom one is interacting. Thus, an awareness of the diversity that defines the people in the Arab world—and modifying one's expectations accordingly— is a preliminary step in developing intercultural communication competence (Almaney & Awan 1982; Nydell, 2005). Depending on one's linguistic ability, this implies sensitivity to language variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, and the idioms the speaker is using. It suggests an awareness of the other person's religious affiliation, as well as religious groupings, historical tensions, or alliances. Geography and history, while sometimes overlooked, are important avenues for connecting with the people and their past. Familiarity with local and regional politics can help one avoid misunderstandings because politics may sometimes be an unavoidable topic.

A second aspect of intercultural competence entails refining one's observation skills and attuning one's focus to social and relational cues. How well can one decipher which social cues are important? All behaviors may have meaning, but not all may imply relational significance. How well can one read, understand, and employ social cues to build relationships? For nonnative speakers of Arabic, communication competence may be better demonstrated by their social fluency rather than linguistic ability.

Intercultural scholarship often stresses language ability and encourages fluency as a determinant of communication competence (Deardorff, 2004). This focus on language is perhaps understandable, particularly if one considers the low-context focus on code as observed by Hall (1976). In addition, given the strong association between language and culture, it is sometimes suggested that if one masters the language, then one has mastered the culture. However, it is possible to be fluent in the language yet ignorant of the culture. As one international executive charged with managing relations for a major corporation advised, if given the choice between hiring someone who was fluent in the language or someone with limited language ability and high cultural awareness, choose the latter (T. McLean, personal communication, December 2006). He highlighted the danger of linguistic fluency in the absence of cultural knowledge. If someone speaks the language, there is often a corresponding expectation by the local people that the person is also familiar with the social customs and graces. Yet, as he aptly observed, people tended to be less forgiving of social gaffs from a linguistically competent individual than they are of linguistic gaffs from a culturally competent individual.

Striving for social as opposed to linguistic fluency may be particularly sage given the nature of the Arabic language. As linguistic scholars have noted and untold students have professed, Arabic is one of the most difficult languages to learn (Wickens, 1980). Even achieving a modicum of fluency can be frustrating. The written language is different from the spoken language, the spoken language varies from region to region, and within regions, it can vary from city to city. It is possible, in fact not unusual, to find individuals proficient in reading Arabic yet unable to engage others in casual conversations.

Ironically, however, it is also not unusual to find individuals with no reading ability who are adept at navigating the social terrain with only a limited linguistic ability. These individuals have gained entrée into the social arena by using language to achieve a social fluency. What this entails is learning the social grammar underlining the many greetings and expressions—what to say when and to whom, what the appropriate replies are, and the variations for particular social circumstances. Yousef (1974, p. 383) referred to the plethora of social greetings, compliments, and expressions in the Arab world as "phatic communication." Phatic (binding) communication, coined by anthropologist Malinowski (1923), is ritualistic communication that is low information content but critical to relationship building and maintenance. DeVito (1986) described phatic communication as "the small talk that precedes the big talk [that] opens up channels of communication" (p. 228). Within interpersonal communication scholarship, phatic communication is spotlighted as a preliminary level of self-disclosure (Veenendall & Feinstein, 1996, p. 140), a feed-forward message that signals a willingness to engage socially (DeVito, 2001, p. 13), and a "small but effective" measure of confirmation of the other (Patton & Giffin, 1977, p. 134).

While the importance of phatic communication is mentioned in interpersonal communication, its relevance to cultures that stress relationship building and maintenance may deserve renewed attention in intercultural communication. Developing an awareness if not appreciation of phatic communication may be particularly important for goal-oriented individuals. In their cross-cultural study of effective managers, Dean and Popp (1990) found culture-specific data illustrating how achievement-oriented individuals tend to focus more on "getting things done than

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developing interpersonal relationships" (p. 416). Finally, it is worth remembering that the essence of eloquence is not mastery of the language per se but rather the ability to use language to emotionally connect and move others (Hamod, 1963; Shouby, 1951). Eloquence, in Arabic, is captured by the expression, "Words from the heart fall in the heart, those from the tongue reward only the ear." One does not have to be fluent in Arabic to speak from the heart.[5]

Another aspect of intercultural competence involves modeling and employing social behaviors. This step, as well as the previous ones, parallels those within the literature. While there are many intercultural models available, a shorthand model that captures the essence of the process is Howell's (1982) interpersonal model, which has also been adapted and adopted by the U.S. Peace Corps (1999, p. 199) and has parallels with Bennett's (1998, p. 26) ethnocentric/ethnorelative model. According to Howell's model, the first stage of *unconscious incompetence* is when an individual misinterprets others' behavior but is not aware of it. The second stage, *conscious incompetence,* is when an individual is aware that he misinterprets other's behavior but does nothing about it. The third stage, *conscious competence,* is when the individual thinks about his or her communication behavior and consciously tries to modify it to increase effectiveness. The fourth stage, *unconscious competence,* is when the individual has practiced and internalized effective communication behaviors. The fifth stage, *unconscious super-competence,* represents the highest level of communication fluency. It is the second and third stages of Howell's model that reflect the aspect of modeling and employing behaviors. It is what Woodman (1973) described as "trying on behavior":

Trying on behavior is always risky business. You may muff it, you may make a fool of yourself, and you'll almost always feel awkward, even though perhaps you don't appear that way. (p. 10)

Trying on behaviors—even if they feel awkward—can enhance an individual's effectiveness and facilitate the relationship-building process. However, the transition from conscious competence to unconscious competence can present the most difficulty for the individual in terms of intrapersonal communication in the intercultural setting. Lane (2007) adroitly identifies the hazard of this transition: "The risk is that some learners may feel like their culture and individuality is lost once they reach this advanced state" (p. 26). Grove and Torbion (1985) described individuals at this stage as "deeply involved and deeply confused" (pp. 214–215).

This reaction during this transition stage captures the phenomenon of "self-shock" (Zaharna, 1989). Whereas culture shock is an awareness of the differences of the cultural other, self-shock is an individual's awareness of the differences with and within the self. Self-shock emerges in the process of modeling and employing new behaviors. The more an individual tries to align his or her behaviors to meet cultural expectations of others to achieve intercultural communication competence, the more the individual can risk undermining his or her own identity-bound behaviors.

What is sometimes overlooked in the intercultural quest to modify one's behaviors to the new sociocultural context is that behaviors are not only culture bound (Hall, 1976) with respect to a particular cultural setting but also identity bound with respect to individuals (Zaharna, 1989). Communication behaviors carry with them not just

a task function (i.e., communication to get something done) and social function (i.e., communication to facilitate relations with others) but also an identity function (i.e., communication that defines one's self to others). The identity function of communication suggests that all communication carries corresponding implicit or explicit meaning for how the individual views himself or herself and how that person wishes others to view him or her. Within the familiar confines of intracultural communication context, individuals often have a repertoire of identity-bound behaviors used to maintain a consistent and stable sense of self. The challenge of intercultural communication occurs on two levels. One is when an individual employs an identity-bound behavior that elicits unexpected or undesired responses in the other, responses that disconfirm rather than confirm the individual's identity. The other challenge is applying new and even contradictory meanings to identity-bound behaviors.

The dual challenges of identity can be particularly problematic given the delicate balance between individuality, individualism, and collectivism. As Ayish (2003) pointed out, within the Arab cultures, there is a strong sense of individuality. However, this individuality is expressed within the context of the social group. As he notes, even individuals raised in this sociocultural milieu must learn to straddle the dichotomy of individuality and collective conformity. Appreciating and developing this critical skill may be particularly challenging for persons who place a premium on individualism and/or fail to distinguish between individuality and individualism. As Condon and Yousef (1975) point out, individualism poses a strong resistance against conformity and group pressure. Confusing individuality with individualism within the collectivist context may feel like pressure to conform. The strong associative pull toward relationships can further exacerbate feelings of a pressure to conform. What is ultimately required to comfortably transition from conscious to unconscious competence is for individuals to appreciate the distinction between individualism and identity and then cultivate that personal individuality within the social relationships and contexts that define the Arab world.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored intercultural communication competence in the Arab world. Recognizing the diversity of the region as well as the importance of relationships and social context are pivotal communication components for navigating the region's rich cultural terrain. While the intense focus on the Arab world has made writing about culture and religion within the region sensitive and at times even controversial, the need for intercultural communication competence with the peoples of the Arab world has perhaps never been greater. This chapter has been a modest step in that direction and invites further exploration.

Notes

1. "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp is in a glass, the glass as it were a brilliant star, lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would almost glow forth,

though no fire touched it. Light upon Light! Allah guides to His Light whom He wills. And Allah sets forth parables for mankind, and Allah is all-Knower of everything" (Quran 24:35).

2. "The likeness of those who take false deities as protectors other than Allah is like the spider who builds for itself a house; but truly the frailest of houses is the spider's house—if they but knew" (Quran 29:41).

3. "It was We who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein" (Quran 50:16).

4. "When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with what is better than it, or (at least) equal to it. Allah takes into careful account all things" (Quran 4:86).

5. Speaking from the heart tends to carry more persuasive power than intellectually rationalized arguments. This is because, as M. Y. Ali (1934/2003) noted, "[The] heart in Arabic means not only the seat of affection, piety, charity, etc., but also of understanding and intelligent appreciation of things" (p. 1698).

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