INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS:
get ready for an inspiring journey!
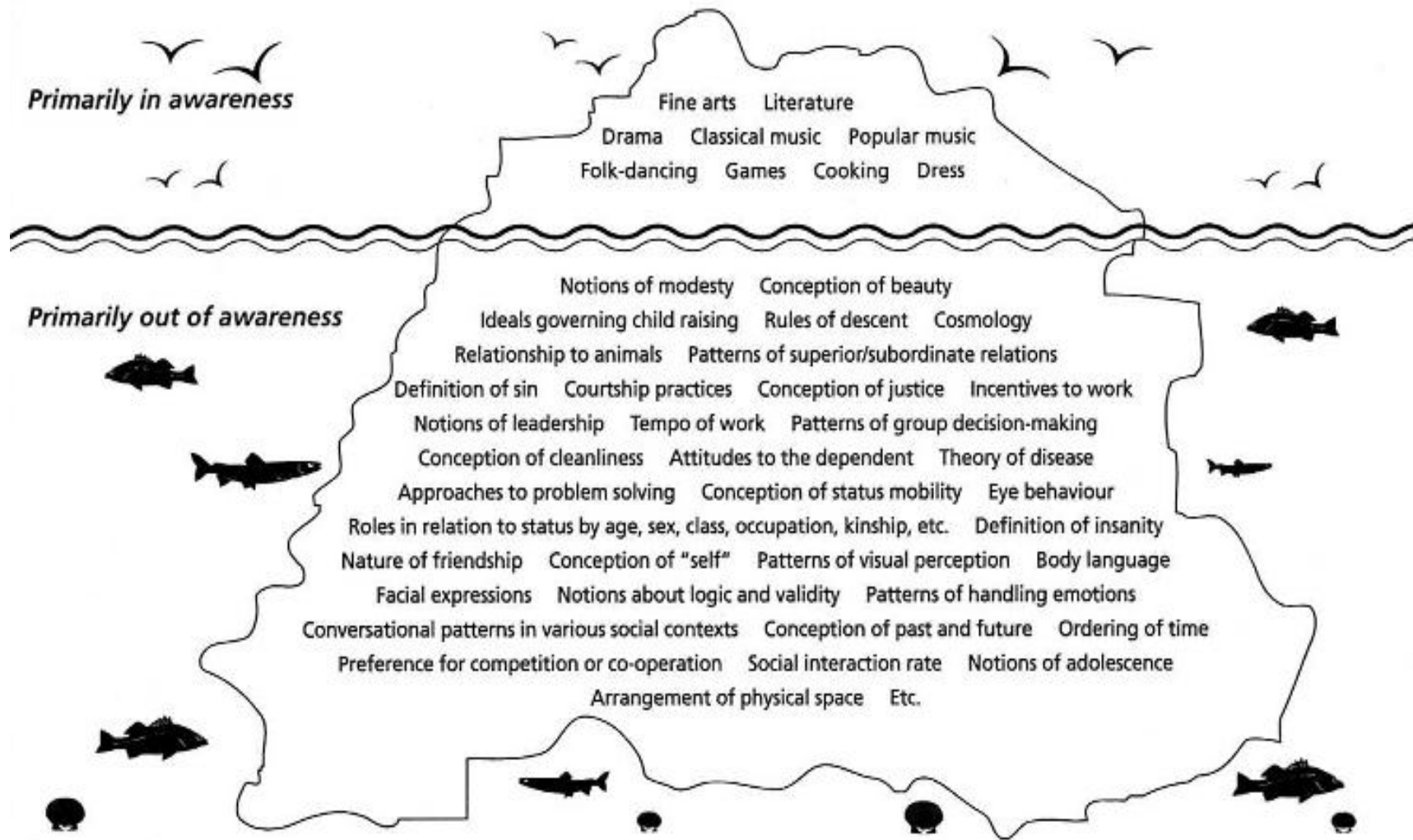
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Goals of the lecture

- to provide relevant information from the field of Intercultural Communication, with a focus on challenges that intercultural encounters may bring and ways of dealing with those challenges
- to raise cultural awareness and encourage self-reflection
- to encourage the appreciation of difference
- to raise motivation to interact in diverse contexts and learn from intercultural encounters

Culture

- culture - learned and shared patterns of beliefs, values and behaviours that distinguish one group of people from another
- we interpret the world through the frame of reference of our own culture
- different levels of abstraction: national culture, professional culture, organizational culture, family culture etc
- we are simultaneously members of different cultures
- culture is dynamic; it is negotiated and created in interaction with others

Culture: The iceberg model of culture

Primarily in awareness

Fine arts   Literature
Drama   Classical music   Popular music
Folk-dancing   Games   Cooking   Dress

Primarily out of awareness

Notions of modesty   Conception of beauty
Ideals governing child raising   Rules of descent   Cosmology
Relationship to animals   Patterns of superior/subordinate relations
Definition of sin   Courtship practices   Conception of justice   Incentives to work
Notions of leadership   Tempo of work   Patterns of group decision-making
Conception of cleanliness   Attitudes to the dependent   Theory of disease
Approaches to problem solving   Conception of status mobility   Eye behaviour
Roles in relation to status by age, sex, class, occupation, kinship, etc.   Definition of insanity
Nature of friendship   Conception of "self"   Patterns of visual perception   Body language
Facial expressions   Notions about logic and validity   Patterns of handling emotions
Conversational patterns in various social contexts   Conception of past and future   Ordering of time
Preference for competition or co-operation   Social interaction rate   Notions of adolescence
Arrangement of physical space   Etc.

Source: p.14 AFS Orientation Handbook Vol.4, New York: AFS Intercultural Programs Inc., 1984

When cultures meet...

- monocultural communication - similarity-based; intercultural communication - difference-based (Bennett 1998)

- frustration & misunderstandings

- being prepared for cultural differences helps to cope better in intercultural encounters and to learn from one's intercultural experiences

Challenges in intercultural communication
(adapted from Barna 1998)

1. Assuming similarity

2. Stereotypes

3. Negative evaluations

4. Verbal communication

5. Nonverbal communication

6. Strong feelings & emotions

1. Assuming similarity

- fallacy of 'people are people' approach; biological similarities not helpful in intercultural communication
- domination of Western lifestyle -> illusion of similarity (dress, rituals, food, language)
- applying 'common sense' as a threat to successful communication
- ethnocentrism – own culture centeredness

1. Assuming similarity: how to cope?

- assume difference, treat each intercultural encounter as an individual case; sort out the cultural modifiers in each separate encounter
- be flexible, don't follow lists of 'dos and don'ts' blindly
- learn to understand the assumptions and values underlying people's behaviour by gaining *cultural literacy* (knowledge of the cultural foundations of the country and its people - history, literature, the language)

2. Stereotypes

- stereotypes - overgeneralised beliefs that serve as conceptual bases for processing reality
- thinking in stereotypes - believing that all members of a given group share a certain characteristic (Bennett 1998)
- stereotypes can be both positive and negative; they all threaten communication by making our perception selective (Bennett 1998)
- stereotypes are persistent (national myths and truisms, the media, rationalising prejudice, reinforcing one's old concepts)

2. Stereotypes: how to cope?

- stereotypes vs. generalisations: it is necessary to make *cultural generalisations* (working hypotheses that should be tested in any new encounter)
- lack of hypotheses -> *naive individualism* or acting on 'common sense' (Bennett 1998)
- in making cultural generalisations, remember that while nearly all beliefs are demonstrated in any culture, every culture will show a preference of some beliefs over others

3. Negative evaluations

- ethnocentrism - own culture centeredness; examining attitudes and behaviours of others from one's own perspective

- assuming that our own way of life is the best and most sophisticated one -> negative evaluations

'With a little luck, they may revere us as gods.'

Cartoon by Gary Larson

3. Negative evaluations: how to cope?

- look and listen empathically

  sympathy – 'treat others as you would like to be treated'
  empathy – 'treat others as they would like to be treated'

- be other-oriented
- be open-minded
- learn to appreciate difference

4. Verbal communication

- *'Learning the local language will solve all the problems,' 'You can always get by with English'*
- linguistic relativity (Sapir –Whorf hypothesis): the way that speakers of different languages see and experience the world is dictated by the characteristics of their mother tongue
- cultural differences are 'hidden' in linguistic manifestations (e.g. lexicon, organization of conversation, choice of topic, directness/indirectness) (Muller-Jacquier 2003)

4. Verbal communication

Direct verbal communication style:

- context is not emphasised
- important information communicated in explicit verbal messages
- self-expression, verbal fluency and eloquent speech are valued
- opinions and intentions expressed directly

Indirect verbal communication style:

- explicit verbal messages not emphasised
- important information carried in contextual cues (e.g. place, situation, relationship)
- harmony valued (-> using ambiguous language)
- people tend to talk around the point and won't say 'no' directly

(Hall 1975, in Chen & Starosta 2005:147)

4. Verbal communication

- communication is patterned in culturally distinctive ways, rules for producing sociable speech vary from culture to culture, which may lead to miscommunication and stereotypes

  (Carbaugh 1996)

- think of how non-Finns may perceive Finnish communication

Finnish communication rules:

- ✓ don't state the obvious
- ✓ make only relevant, socially worthy contributions
- ✓ be honest
- ✓ don't interrupt the other, wait for your turn to speak

4. Verbal communication: how to cope?

- listen carefully
- use metacommunication; talk about communication, ask for explanations (it's not embarrassing to admit that you don't understand)
- reflect on your own practices, try to see yourself as others see you
- humour, irony and sarcasm are dangerous

5. Nonverbal communication

- nonverbal communication – all intentional and unintentional stimuli between the communicating parties, other than the spoken word
- only part of nonverbal communication is available as an international language
- nonverbal communication is less systematised than verbal communication, it is culture-bound, and it is ambiguous

5. Nonverbal communication

- **observable nonverbal signs:**

  -body language (e.g. facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, touch)

  -paralanguage –vocal signs (e.g. volume, pitch, speech rate, vocal segregates like *uhum, em, you know*)

  -clothing, hairstyle

  -architecture etc

- **less obvious unspoken codes:**

  -proxemics - how people use and perceive the space around them (e.g. informal space – distance between the interactants in communication)

  -chronemics – how we use time in communication (e.g. present, past and future time orientation, monochronic and polychronic cultures)

5. Nonverbal communication

monochronic time-oriented cultures:

- schedules dominate relationships
- rigid deadlines and appointment times
- one task at a time
- personal time and work time separated
- time inflexible and tangible

polychronic time-oriented cultures:

- relationships supercede schedules
- flexible deadlines and appointment times
- many tasks handled simultaneously
- personal time and work time not clearly separated
- time is flexible and fluid

Particularly distressing to Americans is the way in which appointments are handled by polychronic people. Being on time simply doesn't mean the same thing as it does in the US. Matters in a polychronic culture seem to be in a constant state of flux. Nothing is solid or firm, particularly plans for the future; even important plans may be changed right up to the minute of execution.

(Hall 1984: 47, in Chen & Sarosta 2005:101)

5. Nonverbal communication: how to cope?

- become aware of own nonverbal behaviours and their meanings
- observe similar situations by comparing and contrasting daily life events in your culture and the new culture
- try to find out about greeting rituals, dangerous/taboo gestures etc
- ask informants about meaning of certain nonverbal cues

6. Strong feelings and emotions

- strong feelings and emotions inherent in intercultural encounters
- *anxiety* - feelings of being uneasy, tense or worried, similar to fear but often without a clear source
- *uncertainty* – triggered by inability to predict others' attitudes, behaviour or feelings and inability to interpret others' behaviour
- a certain amount of anxiety and uncertainty can enhance performance
- prolonged state of sustained anxiety and uncertainty may lead to *culture shock*

6. Strong feelings and emotions

- **aspects of culture shock:**

  1. a feeling of strain (from our attempts at psychological adjustment)
  2. a feeling of loss (friends, family, status, possessions)
  3. a feeling of being rejected by or rejecting the host nationals
  4. a feeling of confusion (beliefs, values, role expectations)
  5. feelings of anxiety, disgust, surprise (in the face of differences)
  6. a feeling of helplessness (inability to cope in the new environment)

- **symptoms of culture shock:**

  depression, helplessness, hostility to the host country, overidentification with one's home country, homesickness, withdrawal, isolation, loneliness, paranoid feelings, preoccupation with cleanliness, irritability, confusion, defensiveness, intolerance of ambiguity, impatience, bad physical shape, headaches, backaches, insomnia

6. Strong feelings and emotions

- different effects, degrees of severity and time spans
- persons with an adaptive personality cope better
- culture shock may come back as re-entry shock

6. Strong feelings and emotions: how to cope?

- learn to accept cultural differences
- practice positive coping mechanisms ('challenges,' not 'threats,' sharing feelings with others -> importance of social networks)
- learn to understand and counteract your body's physiological reactions
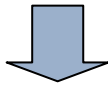
Intercultural learning

- strong feelings & emotions are related to intercultural learning: stress - adaptation - growth process (Kim 2001)

'A crisis, once managed, presents the stranger with an opportunity for new learning and for strengthening his or her coping abilities' (Kim 2001:56)

Intercultural learning

- ethnocentrism, cognitive simplicity

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ethnorelativism, cognitive complexity

- intercultural learning as a deeply transformative process; getting deeper knowledge of self and, through this better understanding, being able to revoke the conventional limitations of one's thoughts and actions -> cognitive shift needs to take place

How to enhance intercultural learning?

- be reflective (reflect on your experiences, on your feelings and emotions, on how you have been changing)
- open yourself to others (networking, sharing, involvement, investment; learning as co-creating)
- open yourself to change

Intercultural competence

- goal of intercultural learning
- ethnorelativism, intercultural identity
- interculturally competent persons are flexible, adaptable, empathetic, other-oriented, culturally literate; they have complex identities and construct new frames of reference to accommodate new cultural knowledge

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