

Preparing Students for the Ethical Challenges of Global Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to teaching ethical intercultural communication. This approach helps students become aware of their own ethnocentric attitudes and helps them move beyond those perspectives to develop a mindful approach to intercultural communication. The paper begins by introducing the concept of mindful communication and the challenges of developing of a code of ethical behavior for communicating across cultures. Then, strategies for reconciling cultural relativism and universalism are offered. Finally, the paper provides a set of guidelines for ethical behavior in intercultural encounters.

Keywords: ethics, intercultural communication, global citizenship, ethnocentrism, cultural relativism, universalism, contextual relativism

INTRODUCTION

Educators today need to prepare students for the many challenges they will face in the workplace and in their lives as concerned global citizens. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing global citizens is the need to develop a code of ethical behavior that can address the many diverse issues they are likely to encounter when communicating across cultures. Many of the challenges facing our global society involve ethical dilemmas; these include corporate responsibility for the environment, political oppression, women's rights, and child labor.

ETHICS AND CULTURE

Ethics is a system of moral principles used to govern the behavior of individuals and groups; these principles are based on beliefs about what is "good" and "bad" in human behavior. Ethics derive from group values, and since values are determined by culture, ideas about what constitutes ethical behavior differ across cultures [1]. Each culture has a unique set of ethical standards. These ethical standards reflect deeply held beliefs about "right" and "wrong," which behaviors are considered virtuous, and which behaviors are unacceptable within a particular culture. For example, some cultures allow child labor; individuals from outside those cultures may find this practice problematic. However, it is equally problematic

for individuals or groups outside a culture to dictate their ethical values to members of that culture.

Cultural differences can create many obstacles to effective communication among members of diverse cultural groups, both within and among nations. The topic of ethics in intercultural communication is a stressful one for people of all cultures [2]. The topic is stressful because individuals feel threatened when their beliefs about "good" and "evil" and about "right" and "wrong" behavior are challenged in any way. Most cultures believe that their ethical code sets a standard that is the "right" way for all people—in all cultures—to behave. Further, most cultural groups believe that their in-group is superior and behaviors of other cultures that differ from their own are "wrong," "inferior," or "immoral."

ETHNOCENTRISM

The belief that one's own culture or co-cultural group is superior is a universal phenomenon. The word ethnocentrism comes from the Greek *ethnos* meaning "nation" and *kentron* meaning "center" [3]. Therefore, one could say that ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is at the center of the universe. In fact, this perspective can be seen in maps that depict a particular nation in the very center of the map [4, pp. 236-237]. From an ethnocentric perspective, individuals judge all other cultures in relation to the values and norms of their own cultural group.

One reason for the incidence of ethnocentric thinking in all cultures is its relationship to group survival. An ethnocentric perspective can increase group solidarity, cooperation, loyalty, and effectiveness. When threatened, a cultural group can maintain its identity by differentiating itself from out-groups. Often, an in-group's identity is supported by ethnocentric thinking — that is, by comparing the group favorably with out-groups and emphasizing the superiority of the in-group. Members of out-groups are stereotyped and judged harshly in order to strengthen the in-group's identity and self-esteem [5]. During war time, soldiers may find it easier to kill the enemy if they consider enemy soldiers to be inferior and "less human." This dehumanizing attitude is demonstrated when animal names like "dogs" or "pigs" are applied to the enemy. During the Iran-Iraq war, a military commander spoke of the enemy's defeat as "the

annihilation of thousands of harmful . . . insects” [6, p.174].

MINDFUL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Although ethnocentrism may play a role in the survival of cultural groups, the survival of our global community as a whole is likely to be better served when we move beyond ethnocentric perspectives in our approach to intercultural communication. It is valuable to adopt a mindful approach to intercultural communication when wrestling with ethical questions. Intercultural communication scholar Stella Ting-Toomey defines mindful intercultural communication as creating a feeling of “being understood, supported, and respected” in the individual(s) with whom one is communicating [7, p. 46]. Mindful individuals strive to understand the perspectives of diverse others. They avoid ethnocentric and stereotypical thinking and bring an open mind to knowledge of other cultures. There are many benefits to be derived from mindful intercultural communication.

There are several ethical issues that must be addressed whenever we encounter members of other cultures. These issues may arise when we are working or studying internationally or when we are interacting with members of diverse cultures domestically. In our global community, we are all likely to have intercultural encounters both face-to-face and in virtual settings, in the workplace and in our personal lives.

Mindful communicators face several ethical questions when engaging in intercultural communication. Should an individual living in another culture adapt to that culture’s ethical beliefs or preserve his/her own? How should one respond if the ethical standards of another culture clash significantly with one’s own culture? How do parties involved in international business decide whose code of ethics to follow? Should a nation require members of diverse cultures living within its borders to give up ethical values if they conflict with those of the majority culture in the nation? Should developed nations offering aid to developing nations make their aid contingent upon the developing nation’s conforming to the developed nation’s ethical standards? The primary question underlying all of these questions is: Should one set of ethical standards be applied universally across all cultures?

MORAL EXCLUSIONISM

One of the greatest challenges related to ethical issues is determining whose standards will apply in a particular situation. Usually, within a nation the majority culture’s values dominate that nation’s ethical standards. In U.S. history, there was a time when the white majority’s code of ethics dominated society to the detriment of African

Americans, who were not afforded the same treatment as white Americans. The majority culture within a nation has the power to enforce its beliefs about “right” and “wrong” and about what is acceptable behavior and what is not. In some cases, the power of the majority has been used to exclude certain groups from the protection of the ethical code that applies to all other members of the culture.

When members of a majority culture in a society apply ethical standards of justice only to members of dominant communities, they are practicing moral exclusionism. Moral exclusion allows members of some groups to be treated in ways that would be considered immoral if they were applied to members of the dominant culture or group. Moral exclusion is based on a belief that the out-group members are somehow inferior to and “less human” than members of the majority culture, and therefore, are not deserving of the same treatment.

Often political and social upheavals can lead to acts of moral exclusionism. For example, before the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, Serbs, Muslims, and Croats in Bosnia were essentially part of one moral community. However, once the political upheaval began, with its vilification of ethnic groups, the members of the various groups began to exclude others from their moral community. As a result of this moral exclusion, members of the various ethnic groups began committing atrocities against one another — the very groups with which they had once peacefully co-existed. Other examples of moral exclusionism include the extermination of the Jews in Nazi Germany and the Turkish genocide of the Armenians.

TWO APPROACHES TO INTERCULTURAL ETHICS

Individuals who wish to be mindful intercultural communicators face complex challenges because while on the one hand, they wish to treat all others with fairness, on the other hand, they must recognize and address significant differences among cultures in beliefs about what is good and what is right. There are two approaches to ethics that must be understood and reconciled by mindful communicators; they are universalism and cultural relativism.

UNIVERSALISM

A universal approach to intercultural ethics applies the same standards to all cultures and minimizes cultural differences. This approach is based on the belief that there are some ethical standards that apply universally to all cultures. The philosopher Immanuel Kant espoused this approach in his categorical imperative, which states “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” [8]. Kant

believed that a code of ethical behavior should be based on principles that apply universally to all people.

However, the greatest challenge related to the universal approach is concern over who will decide what the universal code of ethics will be. Historically, dominant cultures enforced their ethical standards on other groups. Further most universally applied codes of ethics used today are “imposed ethics that rely heavily on Eurocentric moral philosophies to the exclusion of other cultural groups’ voices” [9, p. 273]. The universal approach to ethics does not consider the fact that ethical principles are the result of cultural values, and that values differ widely from one culture to another. The relative approach to intercultural ethics takes the opposite position; it is based on the belief that it is not possible for any culture to judge the behavior of members of another culture.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism argues that the appropriateness of any behavior can only be determined within the context of an individual’s culture and that an individual or group’s actions cannot be judged by anyone outside the culture. Only members of a given culture can evaluate the behavior of individuals in that culture. Cultural relativism recognizes the importance of cultural values in shaping ethics.

The relativist position can be problematic when taken to an extreme, because it requires that we accept instances of persecution like the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany and apartheid in South Africa. In both cases, the cultural community in which these actions occurred accepted the behavior. While the global community ultimately condemned the behavior, such actions would be accepted from a strictly relative view of ethics since they were accepted by the cultural community in which they occurred.

RECONCILING UNIVERSALISM AND CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Both universalism and cultural relativism have value, but neither one alone is sufficient to guide us in all of the many intercultural encounters we are likely to have throughout our lives; neither one is sufficient to address the many ethical issues facing our global community today. Contextual relativism is one attempt to reconcile the tension between the universal approach and the relative approach to intercultural ethics.

CONTEXTUAL RELATIVISM

The complexity of intercultural ethics requires that we develop a more sophisticated approach to the subject; we cannot rely on one fixed set of guidelines for all our

intercultural encounters. One way to approach ethical dilemmas is to treat each case as unique and to adopt a stance of contextual relativism. This approach differs from cultural relativism in that individuals using this approach do not believe that it is impossible for them to take an ethical stance in relation to the behavior of members of other cultures, but they strive to avoid doing so from an ethnocentric perspective.

Communication scholar Stella Ting-Toomey defines contextual relativism as an approach that emphasizes the importance of understanding the context surrounding any behavior. She states: “A contextual perspective means that the application of ethics can only be understood on a case-by-case basis and context-by-context basis. Each ethical case is a unique case, and each context is a unique ethical context that stands alone. With clarity of understanding of the context that frames the behavior in question (on socio-cultural, historical, and situational levels), intercultural learners can make a mindful choice concerning their own degree of engagement or disengagement in approaching the context” [10, p. 274]. As ethical communicators we must strive to learn a great deal about the background and the surrounding economic, political, and social climate in which any behavior occurs.

For example, the practice of child labor may be considered problematic from our own cultural perspective. The term “child labor” is used to describe “work which is likely to damage children’s health, physical and psychological development as well as their chances of fulfilling other rights, mainly the right to education” [11, p. 15]. Our culture may believe that children should be given an opportunity to gain an education and to enjoy freedom from harsh working conditions. We may deem that the actions of large corporations that use child labor in developing nations are guilty of exploitation, particularly when in some instances the working conditions are little better than those of slavery and have severely detrimental effects on the health of the children.

In 1996 the June issue of *Life* magazine had an article about child labor in Pakistan. The article featured a photograph of a 12-year-old boy surrounded by the pieces of a Nike soccer ball, which he would spend the day assembling for a daily wage of 60 cents. Since that time Nike has developed a “comprehensive system of monitoring and remediation” [12] and has issued a Code of Conduct to its suppliers, binding them to a standard for wages, benefits, health, and a safe working environment. While many other corporations have followed suit, much child labor still exists in the world and at least some of it is the result of unscrupulous corporate practices more concerned about profit than about human rights.

However, it is important for mindful communicators to realize that the actions of the corporations who use child labor are only one aspect of the situation. Before we condemn either the corporations or the cultures that allow children to work under such conditions, we should become informed of the social, political, and economic contexts in which such child labor occurs. In Pakistan, for example, children must earn money to supplement the family income in order for the family to have food to eat. Child labor in Pakistan is linked with other socioeconomic problems including “poor access to resources and production, gender inequality, inequitable distribution of land, [and] environmental degradation” [13].

In Pakistan and many other nations, extreme poverty is one of the primary causes of child labor. Families send their children out to work because they are in a desperate situation. Programs to enhance income and employment opportunities for adult workers are one important step toward alleviating child labor. Another important step is making education compulsory [14]. We may continue to be strongly opposed to child labor, even after we study the context in which it occurs, but we may wish to take a different kind of action to address it once we thoroughly understand the context. We may decide that it is not enough to refuse to buy goods that are the product of child labor. By supporting monetary aid for nations and for individuals in nations where many face conditions of extreme poverty, we may be able to help to alleviate practices that we find problematic.

Often ethical dilemmas can be most effectively addressed by a dialogue between the parties involved rather than by reference to a universal set of standards. Rather than condemning behavior that we find problematic based on our own ethical code, as mindful communicators we should seek to understand the context of the behavior and then to address the underlying issues that have given rise to the behavior. Once we have a thorough understanding of a particular situation, we will need to determine whether we wish to accept the practice, seek a compromise, withdraw from the situation, or take action to change the situation that gave rise to the practice.

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL BEHAVIOR IN INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

As mindful communicators we face the challenges of preparing ourselves for the many intercultural encounters we are likely to have in both our professional and our personal lives. There are some basic guidelines that can serve as a useful starting point for developing our ability to communicate both mindfully and ethically with diverse others. These guidelines are:

- Respect diverse others
- Seek common ground with diverse others

- Respect the significance of cultural differences

RESPECT DIVERSE OTHERS

The most basic tenet of any code of behavior is to afford everyone else the same respect that we would like to be granted ourselves. Almost all the world’s religions teach the importance of treating others as we would like to be treated. The “Golden Rule” exhorts us to recognize the value of all members of our global community; this tenet can be found in the teachings of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, the Native American cultures, and many others. Similarly, David Kale’s universal code of ethics, which states, “Ethical communicators address people of other cultures with the same respect that they would like to receive themselves” [15, p. 469]. This tenet applies to all peoples. Affording respect to all the diverse others with whom we interact both domestically and internationally is one of the benefits of mindful intercultural communication.

SEEK COMMON GROUND WITH DIVERSE OTHERS

When communicating with diverse others, ethical communicators strive to establish common ground. In intercultural encounters, they focus on the similarity of cultural beliefs and values rather than emphasizing cultural differences. Although it is valuable to understand and respect cultural differences, once we have developed knowledge of the values and beliefs of other cultures, we can move on to seeking commonalities in order to establish meaningful connections with members of other cultures. As human beings we share many basic concerns and values; we are all social beings, we all wish to be understood by others and to express ourselves, we all love our children and families, we all enjoy recreation (although it may take different forms in different cultures), and we all face the limitations of the human condition (health concerns, old age, and death).

Typically, ethnocentric perspectives emphasize differences between cultural groups and often use such differences to justify discrimination, oppression, and violent conflict. When we focus on those things that we all share as human beings we are more likely to make possible meaningful dialogue regarding the many challenges we face as global citizens in the twenty-first century.

RESPECT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

While we wish to find and emphasize the commonalities among all people, it is important to give all people the right to their individual perspectives. Members of all cultural groups should be free to express their views, even views that differ from our own. In order for a

genuine dialogue to occur we must allow culturally-diverse others to express their uniqueness. Kale stresses the fact that “ethical communicators place a high value on the right of cultures to be full partners in the international dialogue regardless of how popular or unpopular their political ideas may be” [16, p. 470]. Ethical communicators will recognize the need for dialogue and the value of taking a contextual approach to ethical issues across cultures.

CONCLUSION

Mindful communicators are likely to face many challenges when communicating with diverse others. The first challenge is to move beyond our own cultural perspectives to understand the values and ethical standards of other cultures. Then, we can learn about different approaches to intercultural ethics; the two primary approaches are universalism and cultural relativism. Contextual relativism is an approach to intercultural ethics that emphasizes the importance of understanding the context surrounding any behavior. Once we fully understand the context, then it may be possible for us to take action on a case-by-case basis. This approach to intercultural ethics helps us overcome the shortcomings of universalism and cultural relativism.

When approaching any intercultural encounter, it is important to keep certain guidelines in mind. These guidelines are a useful starting point for developing our ability to communicate both mindfully and ethically with diverse others. We should respect diverse others and their cultural values and beliefs. However, once we have gained an understanding of diverse others, instead of focusing on differences, we should then seek to establish common ground so that we can work together to address the many challenges facing our global society.

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