

ROTARY DISTRICT 5440 NEWSLETTER FOR SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING
 JULY 2021 NUMBER 47
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, COMPETENCY AND UNDERSTANDING

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In these newsletters of the Rotary District Peacebuilders, we want to invite readers for contributions and ideas, suggestions and possibilities for our efforts to educate others by promoting the foundational skills for promoting sustainable peace and civility, i.e., nonviolent conflict resolution, improved communication and cooperation, successful negotiation and mediation. We also want to encourage the critical and creative thinking that can help communities move through obstacles and difficulties among people in more sustainable ways, i.e., with the interconnected health of their people, their economies and their environments. In this issue we focus on the ideas and skills that can help us better deal with conflict with people, customs or ideas from other cultures.

**Eric Aoki will lead our Sustainable Peacebuilding Fellowship
 on Wed. July 7 from 1:30-2:30 MT**

All are invited. Share this newsletter with a friend or colleague.

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/494943309?pwd=SmtTUDYzTIZrcVBhbVLRmdvbVh6dz09>

ALL OF US ARE BIASED

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You may think you are unbiased, but each of us consciously or unconsciously regularly engages in “confirmation bias.” The American Psychological Association (APA) has defined the term, “Confirmation Bias” as: *...the tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one’s preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data* (APA Dictionary of Psychology. <https://dictionary.apa.org/confirmation-bias>).

Evidence of confirmation bias has appeared throughout the history of psychological literature. However, the term was first used in the reporting about an experimental study in 1977 (Mynatt, C. R., Doherty, M. E., & Tweney, R. D. (1977) *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 29 (1), 85-95). Today however, we hear confirmation biases almost daily. They appear in every news story we seek, and in every opinion/belief we hold dear.

Iqra Noor is a premed student at Harvard University, majoring in Neuroscience and Linguistics with a minor in Global Health and Health Policy. She has identified several types of confirmation bias. She writes:

- *Confirmation bias happens when a person gives more weight to evidence that confirms their beliefs and undervalues evidence that could disprove it.*

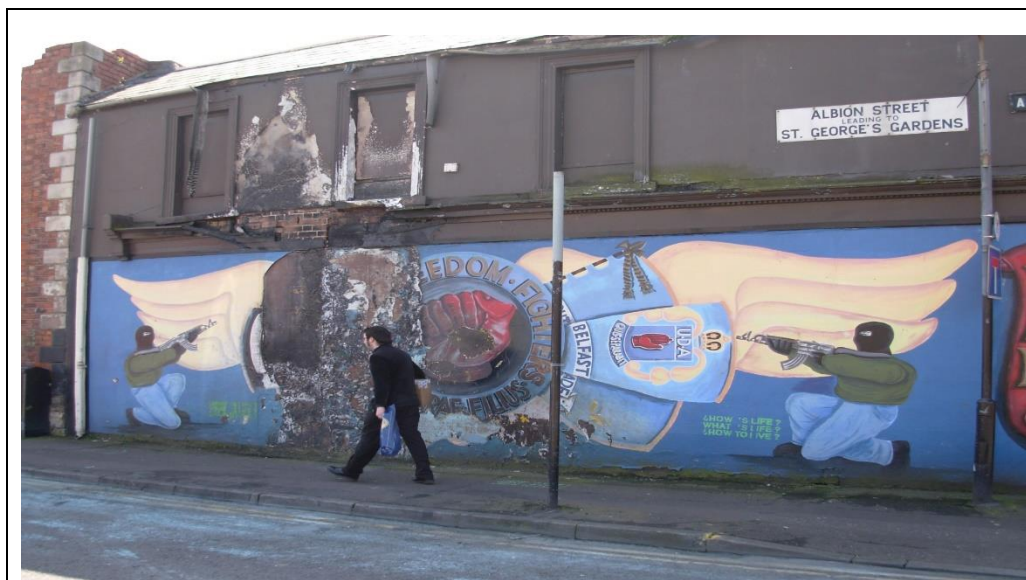
- *People display this bias when they gather or recall information selectively, or when they interpret it in a biased way.*
- *The effect is stronger for emotionally charged issues and for deeply entrenched beliefs. (Noor, I. Confirmation bias. Simply Psychology, June 10, 2020).
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/confirmation-bias.html>.*

We use confirmation bias for many reasons: To minimize the discomfort of holding at least two contradictory ideas or beliefs (which results in “Cognitive Dissonance”); to reduce the fear of being wrong about what we believe; to avoid making mistakes or errors; to affirm/strengthen our own personal beliefs, opinions, expectations and ideas; to seek social approval or political power; to affirm our religious beliefs; to avoid exerting the effort needed to learn something new; to increase our self-esteem; to avoid acknowledging the value of human diversity; to maintain our intellectual integrity; to avoid acknowledging our own ignorance; and to rationalize our irrational behaviors.

What are some of the benefits to be derived from minimizing our confirmation biases? Here but a few.

- You lesson your fears/anxieties of non-dangerous events.
- You remain receptive to learning something new.
- You enjoy familiarity with more of the world in which you live.
- You become more able to effectively cope with your stress.
- You maintain an “open mind.”
- You more easily learn from your mistakes.
- You become more self-accepting.
- You become less judgmental of yourself and others.
- You become more accepting and respectful of human diversity.
- You increase your self-awareness.
- You become more able to love others.
- You enjoy being alive.

As you may know already, you cannot change anything about which you are unaware. My suggestion is that you become more aware of confirmation bias and how and when you use it. That way you might experience more of the above “benefits.”



In Belfast, Northern Ireland, the historic violence made it nearly impossible to let go of bias before the Good Friday Peace Accord was signed in 1998 and the guns were taken off the streets.

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN NEW

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In my 2019 book, *Learning Life's Lessons*, I explore ways that we can explore new dimensions, ideas and cultures. For example, Apple Computer was incorporated in January, 1977. Who could have seen the inspiration back then of this dynamic new company so tuned into the needs of the future? Confronting new technologies and new products, people world-wide were suddenly immersed in new possibilities where their creative initiatives continued to open up new challenges and new possibilities. Travel, conflicts and sharing via the internet have increased our need to communicate effectively across cultures. The following "tip" is adapted *147 Practical Tips for Using Experiential Learning*.

One powerful aspect of experiential learning is gaining new advocates as more and more students find ways to serve or study abroad. Whether it is a church group taking teenagers to Central America to help build homes, day care centers or health clinics, or college students wanting an alternative experience over one of their breaks or to study abroad for an entire semester, experiences in another culture can be challenging, difficult, and life changing, far beyond what academic studies alone can provide. The U. S. Peace Corps prides itself on offering the "toughest job you'll ever love." Note how they describe what they offer in the way of experience.

"The Peace Corps traces its roots and mission to 1960, when then Senator John F. Kennedy challenged students at the University of Michigan to serve their country in the cause of peace by living and working in developing countries. From that inspiration grew an agency of the federal government devoted to world peace and friendship. Since that time, 200,000+ Peace Corps Volunteers have served in 139 host countries to work on issues ranging from AIDS education to information technology and environmental preservation. Today's Peace Corps is more vital than ever, working in emerging and essential areas such as information technology and business development, and contributing to the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief. Peace Corps Volunteers continue to help countless individuals who want to build a better life for themselves, their children, and their communities (30-31)."

Reflect on those difficult experiences, especially those when you were immersed in other cultures. What has taught you the most? List some ideas, both short- and long-term, that could inspire something similar for groups with whom you work.



SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING efforts in Northern Ireland at T.R.E.E.—Timber Recycling Eco Enterprises--have helped youth unlearn bias by (1) reducing waste—everyone and nature matter, (2) teaching marketable "green" skills and viable jobs beyond the reach of the paramilitaries, and (3) having Catholic and Protestant youth work.

STEREOTYPING OTHER CULTURES

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What do you think when you see a hippy walking on the mall? Perhaps s/he has long purple dyed hair, earrings, tattoos, and a careless appearance. Does your mind jump to an assumption of s/he is a drug addict, school dropout, and unemployed, or perhaps a music groupie, homeless, and a liberal extremist? You have just applied a stereotype image to that person.

Just think, if you had met the same person in a different place and time, perhaps 20 centuries ago, you might have judged the same person to be an anti-government reactionary, a troublemaker, a religious fanatic spurning the accepted faith. If you were a Roman government official, a Pharisee, or a leader of the Temple you might feel justified in arresting or even condemning that person to death to avoid social disruption.

Almost every person has biases inbred through their culture, religion, or racial foundation. It is very difficult to avoid the act of stereotyping, and that is why the Peace Corps has made a real effort to train its volunteers to be self-aware and sensitive when they try to integrate into their international assignments. There is a very introspective article written about such problems by Mohammed Chtatou who tells of the Peace Corps experience over the years in Morocco.^{1,2} He contrasts the success of Peace Corps volunteers who integrate themselves into local communities against employees of some national charitable initiatives who treat their interactions as a job and never really interact with the native communities.

Let us consider the Morocco/Peace Corps example as a test case of cultural stereotyping. First what are typical assumptions held by native Moroccans about Americans? They generally believe:

- All Americans are rich from TV programs like “Dallas” and “Dynasty”,
- The streets of America are violent,
- American women are all beautiful, tall, blond, and blue-eyed,
- All Americans are self-centered and do not share, and
- Americans have no sense of family and no respect for old age and seniority.

Alternatively, let’s consider typical American stereotypes about Moroccans. Americans believe:

- All Moroccans dress in robes, turbans, veils, and layers of clothes,
- Moroccan women are sensual, exotic, and untouchable,
- Moroccan men are egotistical, macho, chauvinistic, ruthless, and scheming,
- Moroccans practice strict, restrictive, and extremist Islam,
- Moroccan society is corrupt, selfish, backwards, and reactionary,
- Moroccan culture is traditional and old fashioned, and
- People live in Kasbahs or tents in deserts.

¹ Dr. Mohamed Chtatou is a Professor of Education Science at the University of Rabat, Morocco.
<https://www.eurasiareview.com/author/dr-mohamed-chtatou/>

² Chtatou, Mohamed (2018), The Magic ‘Window’: A Successful Modern Story of Intercultural Communication. Eurasia Review, News and Analysis, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/29092018-the-magic-window-a-successful-modern-story-of-intercultural-communication/>

Such assumptions are not a very good starting point for communication for either side. Mohamed suggests there is a magic window of opportunity to communicate when each side starts by being non-judgmental. Americans must be modest and avoid arrogance, try to speak the other's language, learn about and respect the new culture, begin small and work with others as individuals rather than a member of a group, and share personal details about one-self and one's family.

Mohamed reports that in the case of Morocco, Peace corps volunteers have created life changes such that:

- Many students from Morocco were exchanged to American universities,
- Many Moroccan students chose to learn English themselves,
- Businesses were started both in America and in Morocco involving people of both countries,
- Many people of Morocco are positive about America despite political misadventures and negative propaganda about the US from other Islamic countries.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY AND UNDERSTANDING

Eric Aoki, PhD, Professor of Communication Studies at Colorado State University has had a long career exploring aspects of communication across and between different cultural groups. He can be reached at Eric.Aoki@colostate.edu

The first time I traveled to an array of cities and towns in India as an avowed, multicultural U.S. American, circa 2000-01, I had a moment where I had to put into cultural context and perspective something as everyday as my general conceptualization of "customer service," which I had learned mostly through growing up in U.S. western cities as well as working with and attending to customers in my family's country grocery store in California. My early day socialization taught me that customer service involved many things, but efficiency and speed of product delivery are central to the practice; this conceptualization, of course, is often an ideal and not always the practice experienced wherever you might be.

In January 2001, in a very large handicrafts store in New Delhi, I was shopping to purchase souvenirs for my family and friends back home just prior to heading to the airport later that day. In attempting to purchase my gifts I also found myself working through patience, fortunately, a skill I had also been socialized to practice from my mom and dad. Nonetheless, picking out my handicrafts items and purchasing them involved, from *my* customer service perspective, way too many forms, stations, and time to purchase the gifts that I had selected.

Later it was explained to me by a cultural interpreter and guide that the process of employing many individuals who were working the multiple checkout stations meant being able to hire more individuals from more families to distribute job earnings, particularly in a densely populated city; this moment also served as a good reminder that different contexts within a country as diverse as India (or elsewhere) would also likely mean more diverse "customer service" practices to adjust to too.

My own prioritization of efficiency and speed, with one key person tending to my needs and with me not having to walk around the large store so much while carrying and picking up forms, had been situationally challenged in this *new cultural context*. This experience asked me to address

my own preference in how I believe “customer service” *should* work. Once I gained new cultural perspective and knowledge, I began to understand differently how similar outcomes (e.g., leaving the store with one’s purchased goods) could involve *different processes* and *cultural logics* as to how and why a system worked as it does in its *cultural context*.

Moments like this one and many more life experiences, practices, and intercultural communicative negotiations have become foundational to my intercultural learning, cultural humility, and being reminded how easily my own preferred tendencies could rise to the surface with a growing impatience, and within a cultural context that I was visiting. Moments like this one can teach us to become reflective and thoughtful of our cultural practices within diverse intercultural engagements and contexts.

Communication is central to a foundation of understanding what practices drive and implicate how we engage, facilitate, and manage cultural similarities and differences as well as intercultural communication competency building within diverse local, regional, and global contexts.

Intercultural communication competency (ICC) and skill-building is concerned with understanding better communicative processes and practices in context.

Although ICC can be studied and defined through a variety of academic lenses and focal points, at the heart of ICC is a foundational concern with how it is that we can become more culturally *appropriate* and *effective* in intercultural contexts that we, for example, were not born into and/or socialized into as our primary cultural system(s) of avowal and known experience(s) (Martin & Nakayama, 2018; Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor II, 2017). Four communication constructs/theory/models (among many) that can help facilitate ICC skill-building include: 1. antecedents to contact, 2. communication accommodation theory, 3. intercultural dialectical tensions, and 4. intercultural conflict types and styles.

Antecedents to Contact (Martin & Nakayama, 2018) can help us become culturally reflective and motivate us to think through the powerful influences of our own perceptions and attitudes held prior to even making contact with someone who holds a distinctively diverse identity from our own. These antecedents include childhood experiences, learned historical myths, language(s) we speak, and the impact of current events (Martin & Nakayama, 2018).

Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991; Giles & Ogay, 2007; Turner & West, 2018) can help us understand communicative practices regarding who culturally accommodates to/for whom and under what conditions and with what goals. CAT helps us assess the ways individuals perform *convergence* and *divergence* (Giles & Ogay, 2007) for communicative alignment and/or when creating distance through power and roles. *Over-accommodation* can also exacerbate tensions and problems through stereotypes and/or culturally inappropriate and offensive communication. Listening, learning, and working toward *communicative alignment* (note: communicative alignment does not necessarily mean agreement), matters.

Intercultural Dialectical Tensions (Martin & Nakayama, 2018) can help us understand opposing tensions we often face within communicative performances of identity and cultural practices in contexts. These dialectical tensions can include, e.g., how we perceive, value, and enact communicative practices of past/present- - - - - present/future orientation; disadvantages- - - - - privileges; personal- - - - - contextual behaviors; similarities - - - - - differences; individualism- - - - - collectivism, and other dialectical tensions.

Finally, understanding **Intercultural Conflict Types** (i.e., affect, cognitive, values, interests, goal), **Approaches** (i.e., direct, indirect, emotional-restraint, emotionally-expressive) and **Styles** (i.e., discussion, engagement, accommodating, and dynamic) (Martin & Nakayama, 2018) may hold limits with fully addressing conflict when there are no easy answers or when ongoing histories of deep conflict pose ongoing challenges, but with regard to ICC skill-building, the types/approaches/styles modeling can help us understand more effective communication and conflict practices as well as understand the defaults we enact or most often use during conflict moments.

Conflict modeling can also provide us with alternative options when identifying the types of conflict we are experiencing and engaging in as well as insights into our communicative alignment or non-alignment with the styles we are performing and the meaning we are making when engaging in conflict. And, as we sometimes learn, people are also concerned with whether (or not) you have taken the time to respectfully listen to their position, even when you disagree with it. Whether your orientation to conflict is that conflict is seen as destructive and/or as an opportunity to grow (Martin & Nakayama, 2018), conflict is often inevitable in human relating. How we learn, then, to understand and manage conflict, matters.

Although these four foundational intercultural communication constructs/theory/models shared above are by no means exhaustive, they provide a starting point toward reflective and skilled engagement with others. These communicative tools also fill our intercultural communication competency back-packs or toolboxes with everyday applications toward potentially enhancing *appropriateness* and *effectiveness* in our intercultural moments of engaging diverse people, practices, and cultural contexts.

References

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See the RI website: <https://my.rotary.org/en/learning-reference/about-rotary/our-priorities>. If you would like to respond to one of the pieces in this newsletter, check out our blog www.rotarypeacebuilder.com and join the conversation! If you would like to contribute to a future newsletter, visit www.rotarypeacebuilder.com/submit/. You can find some of our past issues at the Rotary District 5440 website: <https://www.rotary5440.org/sitepage/peace-building-newsletters>. Future issues may explore the following: MARCH—Peacebuilding through Centering and Restorative Justice. If you have ideas for future topics, please send them to any of our writers.