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Self-Disclosure, Cultural Fluency and Communication

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The idea of self-disclosure and awareness as it relates to communication and international understanding may be a new idea for most of us. However, self-disclosure and awareness in communication are very important. When we try to communicate with other people, we need to know about ourselves as well as about the other people. If we do not know very much about ourselves and if we do not know very much about the people we are trying to communicate with, then probably very little communication will occur. Poyatos (1976) uses the term "cultural fluency" to refer to these areas. I will have more to say about cultural fluency later in this paper.

In the whole idea of self-disclosure and awareness, there are several points that we need to consider and understand. There are things about ourselves that we need to be more aware of, that other people can help us become aware of. In a like manner, there are things about other people that we need to become aware of or help them to understand about themselves. Figure 1, called the Johari Window, was designed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955 to illustrate ralationships in terms of awareness. This model was then used by Luft (1970) and others in a broader

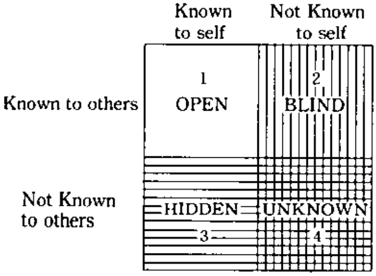


Figure 1. The Johari Window.

sense, not only in the realm of interpersonal relationships but also in the area of international communication. The model is divided into quadrants, numbered 1, 2, 3, and 4, with specific content or significance given each number as shown in Figure 1.* The numbers never change. They always indicate the same area, although the relationships or views change.

Luft (1970, p. 12) gave the following explanation of each quadrant :

> Quadrant 1, the area of free activity, or open area, refers to behavior and motivation known to self and known to others.
> Quadrant 2, the blind area, is where others can see things in ourselves of which we are unaware.
> Quadrant 3, the avoided or hidden area, represents things we know but do not reveal to others (e.g., a hidden agenda or matters about which we have sensitive feelings).
> Quadrant 4, the area of unknown activity, points to the area where neither the individual nor others are aware of certain behaviors or motives. Yet we can assume their existence because eventually some of these things become known, and we then realize that these unknown behaviors and motives were influencing relationships all along.* *

Thus, quadrant 1 is the area everyone knows; quadrant 2 is the area we do not know but others do. We may think that there is nothing about ourselves of which we are unaware as quadrant 2 says. It seems evident that each person would know better than another what is going on in his own mind. However, as Luft points out using Hebb (1969, p. 55), another person may be able to evaluate our present mental state and thereby predict our behavior better than we can. Quadrant 3 includes the idea of wearing a mask behind which the true self is hidden. Finally, quadrant 4 is the unknown which contains information which has been psychologically blocked or somehow buried in the subconscious.

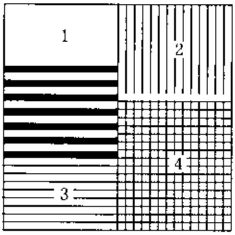


Figure 2. Degrees of openness.

The actual size of these different quadrants depends greatly upon where we are in self-disclosing, where we are in sharing with other people about ourselves; and it is a two-way street — where they are in sharing with us about themselves (Fig. 2). This is true whether the process is between two people, two companies or two countries. Also, within the 4 quadrants there are degrees of openness with the lines between each moving constantly. The point is that even when we are open, part of our openness is still hidden. We may give part of some situation and hold back part of it and keep that held back part in quadrent 3 — the hidden part — while trying to be open. And the same can be true with the blind area. Someone may try to explain to us where our blind side is, but our reaction may determine how much they share with us about that blind spot.

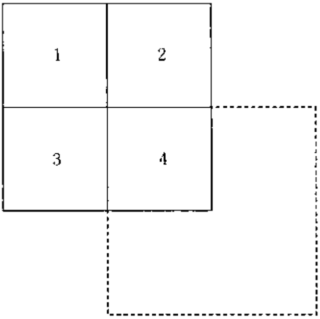


Figure 3. Relative size of Quadrant 4.

So far, quadrant 4 has been shown as being equal in size to the other quadrants. However, that is not really the case. Figure 3 shows the relative size of quadrant 4. This quadrant is probably larger than the combined size of the other quadrants will ever be.

Let us consider now the following two figures (Fig. 4 and 5). The first figure is the ideal situation where quadrant 1 is the largest possible, quadrants 2 and 3 have been reduced and quadrant 4 appears to have been reduced. This is the ideal. As we can see in figure 5, however, when we begin an interaction, the true situation is one in which quadrant 1 is the very smallest of the quadrants, while quadrants 2 and 3 are large and 4 especially is very large.

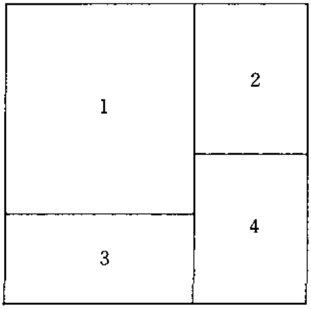


Figure 4. Ideal interaction

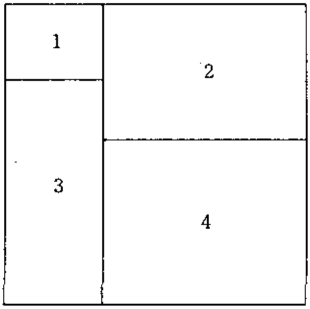


Figure 5. Beginning interaction in a new group.

One of the problems in first meetings or beginning interactions with a new person or group is that quadrant 1 may be even smaller than we realize because we may come to this meeting with quadrant 1 already filled with information about that other person or group. What may have happened is that the open, known to us and to the other person, quadrant already contains all the stereotypes, all the prejudice, all of the misinformation that we have acquired — either studied or heard or seen in movies or on television. In some way we have gained this information and it is misinformation. In communicating internationally and interculturally, we must have some correct information about that culture or that international situation. We must be culturally fluent. Poyatos (p. 3) defines culture as:

> a series of habits shared by members of a group living in a geographic area, learned but biologically conditioned, such as the means of communication (language being the basis of them all), social relations at different levels, the various activities of daily life, the products of that group and how they are utilized, the peculiar manifestations of both individual and national personalities in their

> cultural context, its patterns and prohibitions, and their ideas concerning their own existence and their fellow men.

He also devised the following figure (Fig. 6) to illustrate his view of the relationship of culture and interaction.

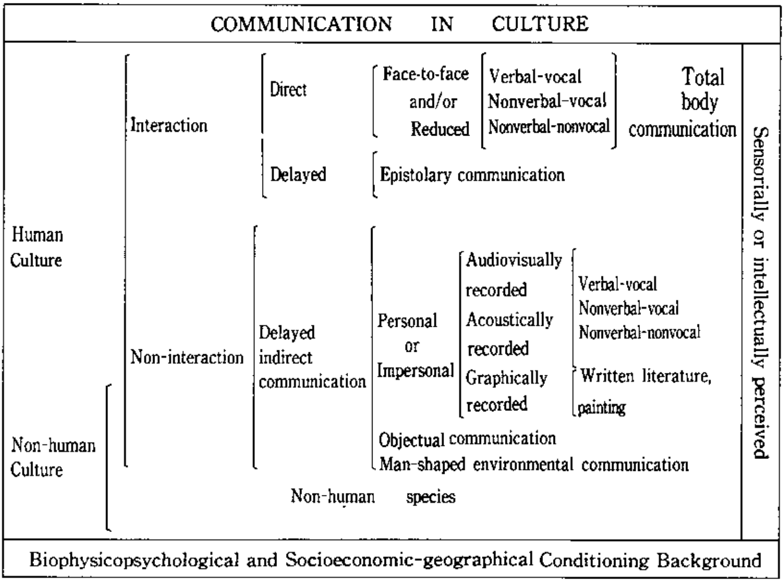
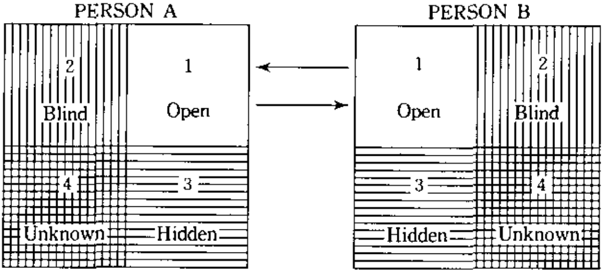

COMMUNICATION IN CULTURE
Human Culture
Non-human Culture
Interaction
Non-interaction
Direct
Delayed
Face-to-face and/or Reduced
Verbal-vocal
Nonverbal-vocal
Nonverbal-nonvocal
Total body communication
Epistolary communication
Delayed indirect communication
Personal or Impersonal
Audiovisually recorded
Acoustically recorded
Graphically recorded
Verbal-vocal
Nonverbal-vocal
Nonverbal-nonvocal
Written literature, painting
Objectual communication
Man-shaped environmental communication
Non-human species
Sensorially or intellectually perceived
Biophysicopsychological and Socioeconomic-geographical Conditioning Background

Figure 6. Culture and Interaction.

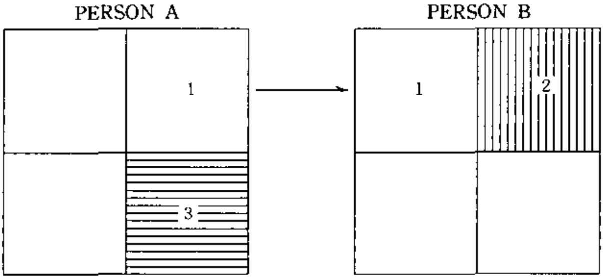
As we can see in figure 6, human culture is divided into two basic sections — interaction and noninteraction — which are then broken into smaller parts. For example, total body communication (direct) is interaction involving message conveyance to people and includes verbal-vocal which is the lexical language; nonverbal-vocal which is paralanguage, the “um” or “ugh” or “aha” those nonverbal but vocal utterances; and then nonverbal-nonvocal which include kinesics and proxemics. Since each of these factors differs from culture to culture, the potential for communication breakdown is great. In a similar way, noninteraction presents possible communication problems. Here the information or message can be conveyed through films, cassette tapes, literature or paintings. Architecture and other ways of using space are included in this section. Poyatos adds another dimension in the form of the non-human interactive form, taking into account communication with animals.

If we consider all of these things together, we will realize that we are individuals and have our own cultural character, which causes us to look at other people and perceive them in a way that is not 100 % accurate. When we attempt to communicate with people of other cultures, we consider those people, what they wear, what thay say, what they eat. We look at all of those things, but it is as if we are using a filter to do so. Then, those things which are common to our own culture, which are acceptable to us in our own culture, we interpret: "Oh yeah, they're just like we are." But we use this filter also to shut out those things which are different from our own culture, those things which are, perhaps, offensive in our culture, those things which are negative or cause a negative feeling. For the sake of international understanding and communication, we must somehow remove that filter. Certainly it is important to be able to speak the lexical language of another people to communicate with them. If that is all that we have learned, however, we still cannot communicate effectively. What we must have is not only a language or lexical fluency, but we must have a cultural fluency as well.

When two people meet together (Fig. 7), Person A and Person B look at each other. They are perhaps using the same words or the same terms but they are probably having difficulty communicating with each other because they are not culturally fluent. They view the open area in the other person through that filter and they "see" those things which are the same or are acceptable or that at least produce positive feelings. Then, they "see" in the blind side all the negative things — the offensive things — that they assume the other person does not know anything about. They assume this is the other person's blind side and that if the blind side were explained, those things would be changed. Possibly changes would be made, but it is also possible that those things are not true blind areas. The problem could be over areas that are cultural differences only. What these people have perceived to be blind areas in the first meeting may be those culturally offensive things in their filters.


PERSON A
PERSON B
2
Blind
1
Open
4
Unknown
3
Hidden
1
Open
2
Blind
3
Hidden
4
Unknown

From person A's point of view


PERSON A
PERSON B
1
3
1
2

From person B's point of view

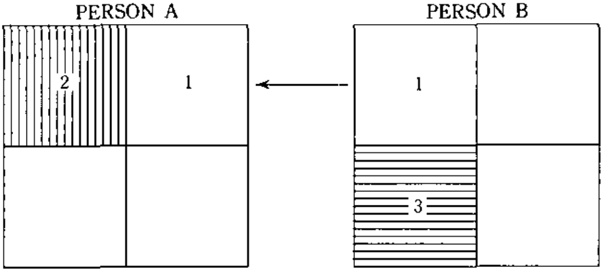

PERSON A
PERSON B
2
1
1
3

Figure 7. Interpersonal Relations.

This point may not seem to be of very great importance. However, as Paul Simon (1980) points out, the repercussions of a lack of cultural fluency can be far-reaching. He relates the lack of both linguistic and cultural fluency in America to such important issues as the trade gap, national security, national isolation and foreign policy. He says: "If we believe we can effectively trade, provide political leadership, keep on top of scientific developments, and share the benefits of the cultural growth of the rest of the world [without linguistic and cultural fluency], we fool only ourselves" (p. 81).

There are various barriers to cultural fluency. One of these barriers is attitude. This attitude can be about religion, politics, customs, food, dress, art, world view perspectives, frames of reference, stereotype and prejudice. Another barrier to cultural fluency is social organization; that is, how the government, how the family, how law is organized. The third one is patterns of thought. That would be the difference between the way a Westerner thinks and the way an Oriental thinks or the way a Latin American thinks and the way an European thinks. The patterns of thought refer to or have to do with moral values and values clarification. The fourth one has to do with role expectations, which means what a man and what a woman are expected to do in that particular culture. The fifth one has to do with the concept of time, whether being on time is perceived as good or whether being late — how many ever minutes or even hours — is perceived as being correct. The next barrier is the handling of space. This includes man-made space — architecture — as well as individual space — the space around us — and how we handle the idea of the use of space. Another problem in dealing with cultural fluency is the language barrier itself. And by this is not meant only whether a translation is correct or incorrect, but rather when the correct translation carries a different set of values because of cultural differences. The last barrier to cultural fluency is the use of nonverbal communication in which each culture has a culture-specific system that includes proxemics, kinesics, gestures (Poyatos, 1976, pp. 7-8).

These barriers to cultural fluency do not imply by any means that one culture is correct or right while another culture is incorrect or wrong. Rather, the point is that cultures are different and we must accept them as such. If we approach an intercultural situation where we are basically fluent linguistically but not fluent culturally, we can expect to have problems such as those mentioned in Simon's book and／or those mentioned in Polite Fictions (Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982). Polite Fictions gives some good examples of why Japanese and Americans seem to be rude to each other in interpersonal interaction. The reason given for the problem is the lack of cultural fluency. It is only as we are willing to engage in self-disclosure with one another, to engage in sharing and learning our cultural backgrounds — those things which make us uniquely ourselves — that we can overcome the fluency problems, both linguistic and cultural.

Consider the following example from Polite Fictions. You have an invitation to go to someone's house for dinner and you are told by the husband "My wife can't cook. It will taste terrible, but I would really like for you to please come and eat dinner." If that telephone call was from a Japanese person to an American person, the American will probably think "If your wife is such a terrible cook, why are you inviting me to dinner at your house? Why don't we go to a restaurant?" This reaction shows a lack of cultural fluency. If the American does not learn somewhere that this is a Japanese "polite fiction" and a very definite part of the Japanese culture, the American will have a very strange view of that particular family, if not all Japanese families. Where does an American learn the "polite fictions" or the cultural assumptions that another society uses? Reading books will help to a degree. Becoming adept in the art of self-disclosure will also help. Creating a climate with opportunities for self-disclosure／awareness will open the way for people to get together to discuss what seems to be wrong or strange and find out the cultural implications. If the American says to the Japanese (after eating a very delicious dinner) "Why did you say your wife couldn't cook? This was delicious. Why did you say that?" And if the other person is willing to disclose about himself and his culture, then it is a learning experience culturally.

As these kinds of conversations, interactions, take place, quadrant 1 increases with real information; what one person thought was part of the blind area of the other person ceases to be thought of in that manner. "Oh, this is a cultural difference and I'm learning it. It's not wrong. It's just different." And so we have discussed what the Japanese do — "my wife can't cook" — and what the Americans do — "my wife cooks very well. Please come eat with us" — these culturally different ways of speaking. The more these differences are discussed, the bigger quadrant 1 of the Johari Window will become. As self-disclosure takes place and quadrants change in size, then cultural fluency increases. What happens between Person A and Person B can also happen between Group A and Group B or Country A and Country B. Thus, as self-disclosure takes place, quadrants change size, and communication and understanding occur.

However, there are ways in which self-disclosure happens and there are ways in which it is hindered. Common errors include:

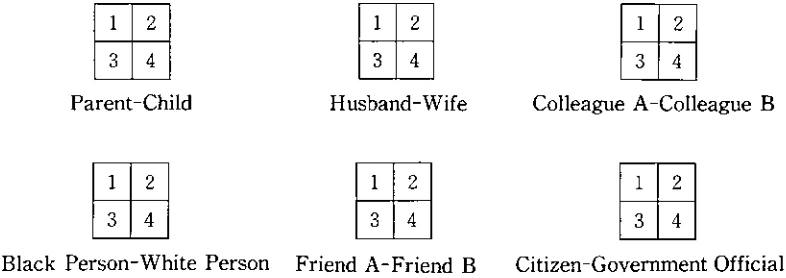
1. Overeagerness to dominate the conversation
2. Little or no reaction to what the other person says
3. Tactless contradiction of the views of another
4. A compulsion to correct others
5. Resorting to personal attacks rather than reasoned dialogue
6. An argumentative attitude
7. An air of superiority
8. Stifling spontaneity in the dialogue by displaying sensitivity to certain topics

9. A lack of initiative in bringing up new topics
10. Creating an atmosphere of competition and debate

None of these will facilitate self-disclosure.

On the other hand, if we really want self-disclosure, if we really want to share our culture with some other person and learn their culture and become fluent with them, then we need to use different techniques. We need to listen to what the other person is saying, not to argue with them later, but to learn what they are talking about and how they feel. We also need to be willing to ask them their views about things without feeling threatened ourselves. Certainly we can disagree with someone, but we can do it in an agreeable way. Also, we can dislike the views held by a particular people or group but not dislike the person or the culture. We can disagree but be agreeable about disagreeing. We do not need to attack the person if we are disagreeing with an idea, especially if we really want to communicate.

The Johari Window that we have been using throughout this paper was designed to explain the process of interaction, either person to person or group to group or whatever. There are different kinds of interpersonal interactions as shown in Figure 8: parent and child; husband and wife; colleague A and colleague B; a black person and a white person; friend A and friend B; a citizen and a government official; and the possibilities are endless for person to person interaction, whether they are of the same culture or of two completely different cultures. Even though the black and white persons in the figure may both be Americans, they both have very different cultures.

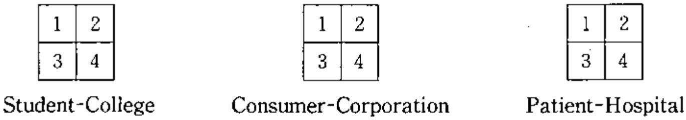


Parent-Child Husband-Wife Colleague A-Colleague B

Black Person-White Person Friend A-Friend B Citizen-Government Official

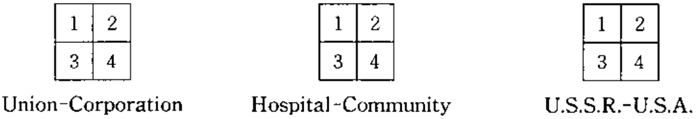
Figure 8. Other kinds of person-to-person interaction.

The Johari Window lends itself to other interaction as well. Figure 9 illustrates individuals and organizations interacting: one student interacting with the college as a whole; a consumer interacting with the corporation or the company that made the product that he bought; a patient and a hospital. Then in Figure 10 the interaction between organizations or groups is shown: a union and a corporation; hospital and community; and two different countries.



Student-College Consumer-Corporation Patient-Hospital

Figure 9. Interaction between individuals and organizations.



Union-Corporation Hospital-Community U.S.S.R.-U.S.A.

Figure 10. Interaction between organizations or groups.

In conclusion, for international and intercultural understanding and communication, if we are really to understand each other, we must get into the mindset, get into the practice of self-disclosing. By so doing, eventually we can move from figure 5 of first encounters to figure 4 of the ideal, especially between countries and individual citizens of those countries. We can move toward the goal of being both linguistically and culturally fluent. As we attempt to break down barriers that stop communication by being more open, more sensitive, more aware of other people, other cultures, and the things that are different — not wrong — in those cultures, we may begin to see a glimmer of true international understanding and to stand on the threshold of peace.

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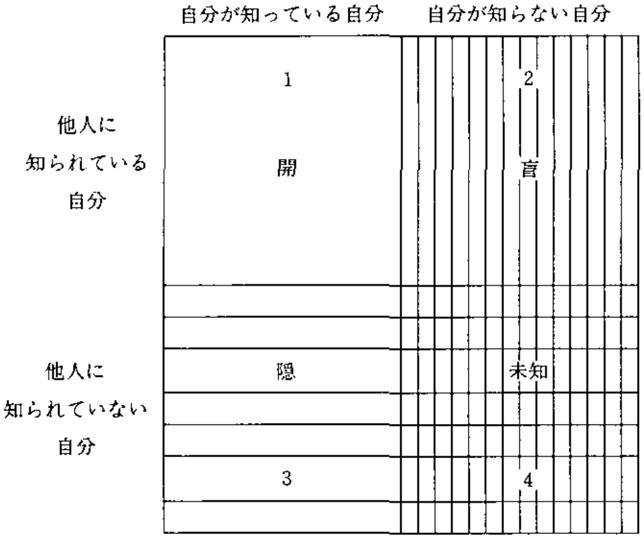

	自分が知っている自分	自分が知らない自分
他人に知られている自分	1 開	2 盲
他人に知られていない自分	隠 3	未知 4

* Japanese translation of Johari Window
Ken Johnson Shenk, 1987

面1　自由で，開かれている部分。自分にも他人にも知られている行動や動機。

面2　「盲」の部分。他人にはみえるが自分自身が知らない部分。

面3　隠された部分。自分は知っているが他人に明かさない部分。
　例1　本音。例2　そっとしておきたい事柄。

面4　知られざる部分。自分も他人も気がつかない行動や動機。実際に存在し得ることは，未知の行動や動機がいつのまにか意識されることがあるから。それが意識されたときに，それが対人関係に影響をもたらしてきたことが分かる。

* * Japanese translation of Quadrants
Ken Johnson Shenk, 1987