Articles

Learning from the Well-Meaning Clash in Intercultural Communication

Douglas R. Heath[1]

Abstract

This article describes and analyzes the "well-meaning clash," a common form of miscommunication between people from different cultures. First, the well-meaning clash from the field of intercultural communications is briefly defined. Second, two descriptions of the same well-meaning clash are provided from the point of view of its two primary participants. Third, the previously described well-meaning clash is analyzed using core concepts of intercultural communication including the *identity meaning function* of culture and *identity negotiation theory*. Finally, it is proposed that learning to communicate *empathetically* and *mindfully* can enable more productive and effective communication between people from different cultures, and help mitigate the negative aspects of the well-meaning clash.

Introduction

A major goal of the field of Intercultural Communication (the study of how culture affects communication between different cultures and groups) is to increase understanding and effective communication in an intercultural context. One major obstacle to effective intercultural communication is the "well-meaning clash." The well-meaning clash has been described as an encounter where people from different cultures are sincerely trying to behave properly according to the norms of their own culture, but because of cultural differences in values, rules, and behaviors, serious misunderstandings occur that impede effective communication (Brislin, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Ting-Toomey (1999) notes that the term "well-meaning" is used to emphasize the fact that normally "no one in the intercultural encounter intentionally behaves obnoxiously or

[1] Faculty of International Studies, Bunkyo University

unpleasantly. Individuals are trying to be well mannered or pleasant in accordance with the politeness norms of their own culture" (p. 23).

As problematic as well-meaning clashes may be for constructive intercultural relations and understanding, their analysis offers much insight and understanding into culture differences and how to become a more effective communicator with differing others. This article offers one means of analyzing a well-meaning clash. For this analysis, the well-meaning clash provided here will be described twice, from the point of view of the two primary participants involved, one of whom is the author of this article.

Before describing this well-meaning clash, providing some background information is in order. This well-meaning clash took place in the summer of 1990. At that time I was participating in a five-month army training course at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the United States. The course was called the IOBC, which stands for Infantry Officer Basic Course. The purpose of the IOBC is to train junior officers, who have just received their commissions, in the necessary skills to be infantry officers for the United States Army. My IOBC class consisted of some 40 officers. At that time, the infantry was reserved for men so there were no women in our class. Of the 40 officers in our class 31 were Americans. The remaining 9 officers were from foreign countries with bilateral military relationships with the United States. Our class had officers from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Jordan, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Thailand, and Togo. The basic schedule of the IOBC consisted of one week of classroom lectures from 9:00 A.M. till 4:00 P.M., followed by one week of practical training in the field. This one week of training in class followed by one week of training in the field was repeated for five months. Like most military training, at times it could be highly stressful.

Because I had lived in Saudi Arabia as a child and had associated mostly with foreigners or other expatriates while living there, I felt more comfortable with foreigners than Americans, and the IOBC was no exception. I got along better with the foreign officers than the Americans and became quite good friends with two officers from the African country of Togo. Their names were Taduna and Apeido. Both spoke very good English, with a slight French accent, and both were charming, confident, and outgoing. Although we trained during the weekdays we had most of our weekends off, so I often went out drinking with Taduna and Apeido and other foreign officers. I think I was the only American officer in our class to regularly associate with the foreign officers outside of training. I felt confident and relaxed communicating with them, so I soon forgot about any real or perceived differences between us. However, Daouda, the officer from Burkina Faso, was another matter. Daouda was always friendly, but seemed nervous speaking English. He was constantly talking to Taduna and Apeido in French. Most of the officers in our class were 2nd lieutenants, but Daouda was a captain, one

rank above us. This would later become an issue, as Daouda is the second participant in the well-meaning clash that I am going to describe and analyze.

This Well-Meaning Clash from My Point of View

During our field training each officer in our class was put in charge of a different training mission, and the other officers would take the roles of regular enlisted soldiers. On one occasion, Daouda was put in charge of a mission that I was a part of. It was late at night, we had been training in a wet, humid, swamp for almost a week, and we were all exhausted. There were no other African or French-speaking officers in our group of ten, so Daouda had to communicate in English. At that time, he had to give us a five-minute mission briefing. A combination of his intense seriousness and lack of fluency speaking English caused a number of the young American officers to snicker, including me. He seemed to ignore the other Americans, but he looked at me with real anger. Later I went up to him with a friendly smile and apologized. He said something to the effect that I should take the training more seriously and respect military rank. He then turned his back on me and never talked to me again. During my five months of training at the IOBC I had a number of verbal confrontations with American officers in my class, and never lost any sleep worrying about them; however, the problem that I had with Daouda I remember with regret.

Now I will provide a description of this well-meaning clash from Daouda's point of view. During the nearly 29 years since I last saw Daouda, I have not had the opportunity to discuss this incident with him, so I do not really know his version of it. Instead, I will rely on my experiences, knowledge, and imagination to provide a picture of how Daouda might have perceived and understood this well-meaning clash. It is written in the first person, as if Daouda wrote it.

The Same Well-Meaning Clash from Daouda's Point of View

In 1991 I participated in a five-month military training course called the IOBC in the United States of America. I am from Burkina Faso. I worked hard to become a captain in our armed forces and I was proud to be chosen to train in the United States. My native languages are Mossi and French, but I have studied English diligently for many years. Having never spent substantial time outside of Africa, there were many aspects of American culture that baffled me. At first, I was pleased at how friendly everybody was. Everyone smiled at me, and asked me questions like how I was doing and how I liked America, but when I tried to answer them they just smiled and nodded their heads. They did not really want to hear my answer.

All of our instructions were in English, and although I studied English intensively in Burkina Faso, this was my first immersion into the English language. Furthermore, I had learned British English, and many of the instructors at the IOBC were from the American South. Their accent

was especially difficult to understand. Soon, I realized that none of the Americans cared if the foreign officers understood the instructions or not. By the end of the average week of training I was tired so I would go drinking with other foreign officers, especially two officers from Togo and one from Cameroon, all of whom spoke French. With their phony smiles and flippant laughter, none of the America soldiers ever joined us except one. His name was Doug and he had lived overseas as a child. He was friendly with us, but was not liked by many of the other American officers. Still, I wanted to know Americans and be friends with them so I tried to be friends with Doug. Unfortunately, he ended up being the same as the rest of the Americans.

Once when we were training in the field I was put in charge of a mission. In my group there were eight Americans, an officer from the Republic of China (Taiwan) and myself. One of the Americans was Doug. Everybody was tired, and after a week of being in the field listening to extremely fast American English, I was looking forward to our weekend break. Then, without any notice, I was given a command position. First, the officer in charge of our training, Captain Cline, gave me the five-minute mission briefing. I tried to take notes, even though he was impatient and spoke very fast. When he asked me if I understood I nodded my head. But when it was my turn to give the five-minute mission briefing to my group the situation became uncomfortable.

After I started speaking all the Americans smiled and a few laughed at me. I knew my English was not perfect, but I had studied English many years and they did not even try to understand me. They did not want to understand me. They did not listen to what I was saying, but how I was saying it. For them I was some dull African from the jungle. But what really bothered me was Doug's behavior. I was beginning to consider him to be a friend, someone I could trust. I thought he was different from the other Americans, but he behaved just like they did. The next day he came up to me with a big smile on his face and tried to apologize, but it was not a sincere apology. (This concludes Daouda's description of this well-meaning clash.)

Analysis of this Well-Meaning Clash

In analyzing this well-meaning clash, I have broken it down into four points described by intercultural studies. The first point is that both Daouda and I were sincere in our attempts to communicate with each other, a basic assumption to a well-meaning clash as previously noted. The second point is that our initial problem was based in the *identity meaning* function of culture (Ting-Toomey, 1999). The third point was our inability to cross from sympathy to empathy as described by Bennett (1998), and the fourth was the lack of, and need for, mindful communication (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Identity Meaning Function of Culture. Both Daouda and I had problems related to the identity meaning function of culture at the IOBC, which, as described by Ting-

Toomey (1999), "proposes that culture plays the primary shaping role in our view of ourselves. It is through core cultural values and practices that the meanings of identities such as ethnicity, gender, and age are defined and differentially valued" (p. 26). In short, the individual's self-identity is primarily a product of the culture they are raised in. It was natural that Daouda, being from the landlocked African country of Burkina Faso, and having English language difficulties, was having adjustment problems at the IOBC at Fort Benning, Georgia, in the United States. He must have been experiencing severe culture shock and language fatigue.

What isn't as obvious is that I was also experiencing difficulties connected to culture and values. This is where the identity meaning function of culture becomes an issue in terms of Ting-Toomey's (1999) Identity Negotiation Theory and its ten Core Theoretical Assumptions. The fourth assumption states, "Individuals tend to experience identity trust when communicating with culturally similar others, and identity distrust when communicating with culturally dissimilar others; identity familiarity leads to trust, and identity unfamiliarity leads to distrust" (p. 40). Both Daouda and I were interacting in a group primarily made up of culturally dissimilar others. In Daouda's case this was obvious, but in my case it was no less true. Having lived in Saudi Arabia in the late 70s and early 80s, and having travelled extensively overseas in the process, I had developed into a classic "third-culture kid," meaning that I had lived much of my developmental years outside of my country of birth and my parents' country of origin. In the process I had developed values and behaviors that were often different from most of my fellow American junior officers, who were raised primarily in the United States.

In fact, from the time my mother and I returned to the U.S. from Saudi Arabia so I could attend high school, I often had values and identity conflict issues with Americans my age. For example, in early October of 1981, most of my classmates at South Whidbey High School in Langley, Washington, were excited about the Rolling Stones concert that was held in Seattle on October 14th and 15th. None of them knew or cared that President Anwar Sadat of Egypt had been assassinated in Cairo on October 6th by Egyptian soldiers that were angry at him for making peace with Israel in 1979. I was living in Saudi Arabia in 1979 and I vividly remember how angry much of the Arab world was at Egypt and President Sadat for making peace with Israel. President Sadat was a hero to me in junior high school, and I cried when he was assassinated. Frankly speaking, I am not sure who was having a more difficult time with identity negotiation at IOBC, Daouda or me. He looked and spoke differently so he was expected to act differently. I looked the same but acted differently, thus was treated differently. Both of us were experiencing identity distrust because we were dealing with culturally dissimilar others under stressful circumstances.

Being Sympathetic versus Empathetic. Although I believe that Daouda and I were both somewhat sympathetic to each other's situation, we were not empathetic. Bennett (1998) says that "empathy concerns how we might imagine the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspective" (p. 197), whereas with sympathy we assume that other people's thoughts and feelings are similar to our own given similar circumstances. I was seeing Daouda's situation from my perspective and vice versa. Neither one of us had enough knowledge of each other's culture, especially at the deeper level of values, to be empathetic.

For example, Daouda came from a society that values hierarchy more than my own. Since I was a 2nd lieutenant, he expected me to show him respect, at least when we were training, because he outranked me as a captain and he was older than me. This conflicted with my own culture where, at least in conversational style, hierarchy is less of an issue. Bennett (1998) quotes Lauren G. Wispé in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: "In empathy, one attends to the feelings of another; in sympathy one attends to the suffering of another, but the feelings are one's own" (p. 196). The key issue here is feelings. Perhaps if Daouda and I had been more conscious of each other's feelings we would have left IOBC as friends. The problem is how to go about understanding others, from the position of our feelings to theirs.

This well-meaning clash with Daouda was an important life experience for me, and in retrospect I can see it in terms of sympathy and empathy. Sympathy as best represented in the Golden Rule was an important value that I was brought up with, based on the passage from the Bible, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matt. 7:12 New International Version). Bennett (1998) notes that "the Golden Rule is typically used as a kind of template for behavior" (p. 191), and is based upon the assumption that people usually have similar feelings and reactions to similar circumstances, ignoring the vast differences in values, norms, and behaviors produced by a myriad of different cultures.

As a third-culture kid growing up in Saudi Arabia, having met many people different to me, I became aware that sympathy and treating others as I would be treated did not always work. But that knowledge was at the unconscious level, not the conscious level. What I realize now is that having empathy alone is not enough, and this point cannot be over emphasized. It is here that mindfulness, as described by Ting-Toomey (1999), becomes critically important. We need to act empathetically, and on a continual basis, by being mindful of our thoughts and behavior, and mindful of the thoughts and behaviors of others. My personal issue has never been an inability to be empathetic, but the ability to consistently behave empathetically.

Practicing Mindful Communication. Ting-Toomey (1999) explains that in order to communicate empathetically we need to be mindful of communication as it is

occurring, moment by moment. And the result of that mindfulness in communication is communicating at a higher, more effective level, where both communicators feel security and trust. Ting-Toomey (1999) states, "The feelings of being understood, respected, and intrinsically valued form the outcome dimensions of mindful intercultural communication" (p. 54). To reach this level of mindful intercultural communication we must be aware and sensitive at each moment of communication. At that moment where Daouda was trying to explain our mission orders to us, and I smiled and snickered like everybody else, I was practicing mindlessness, not mindfulness. I was acting on autopilot. Unconsciously, I probably wanted to be accepted by the other American officers and this gave me an opportunity to confirm my group identity with them. The price for my behavior was adding to Daouda's humiliation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary lesson that I learned from analyzing this well-meaning clash between Daouda and me is that communicating empathetically is an essential part of effective intercultural communication, and it is only limited by one's ability to stay mindful. The problem is, how do we stay mindful? When one feels refreshed and awake it is easier to be mindful, but we are human beings who get tired and stressed, and then being mindful becomes challenging. Perhaps one way is to consciously use silence as a point in time where we can step out of sympathy and mindlessness and into empathy and mindfulness. Most importantly, like developing any difficult skill, learning to communicate empathetically and mindfully takes considerable time, practice, and energy. As an educator, I look forward to offering my students the opportunity to explore their own experiences with well-meaning clashes and, hopefully, gain the insight and self-awareness that such analyses can bring about.

References

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