

Theme 2

Otherization

This theme will explore a major inhibition to communication by looking at how, so easily, we can construct and reduce people to be less than what they are. Continuing from Units A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3 within the Identity theme, the angle on communication will be how we must discipline our own perceptions if we are to communicate successfully. However, Units A2.1, A2.2 and A2.3 will look more deeply at the forces that prevent us all from seeing people as they really are. The weight of responsibility is on ‘us’ to understand ourselves, rather than on essentialist categories of ‘them’.

COMMUNICATION IS ABOUT NOT PRESUMING

Falling into culturist traps

UNIT A2.1

Experience

Continuing to follow the principle that we should try to understand people before we can communicate with them, in this unit we explore how easy it is to be misled by our own preconceptions and to fall into the trap of otherization. As with Unit A1.3, we use an example from within our own society to demonstrate how the tendency to reduce the foreign Other is deep within the roots of society generally. We hope therefore to show how even easier it is to misconstrue people from other societies. Consider the experience given in Example A2.1.1.

Example A2.1.1 The Smith family

A while ago John had neighbours, the Smiths, who belonged to a Christian sect related to the Amish. John and his family took this as a matter of fact because Mr Smith told them so several weeks after moving in during a residents' meeting. However, from the very first John's family saw of them they had suspected something of the sort. There were six children. The girls and Mrs Smith were dressed in long dresses with aprons, which came down to their mid-calf, and wore headscarves over long hair. The boys had long shorts with braces [US, suspenders], which also came down to mid-calf. Mr Smith was clean-shaven, except for a beard around his chin. As they were moving in John and his family could see that their furniture was like old-fashioned wooden school furniture; and they didn't seem to have a television, stereo or video. There was, however, a piano

and John could hear them making their own music for entertainment in the evenings. They were also American.

Several events took place after the family moved in which began to reveal the way in which John was thinking about them.

One afternoon, John was in his garage pottering about when Mr Smith came out and got into his large people carrier. He guessed he was waiting for the rest of his family before going out with them. He really was amazed when Mr Smith turned on the car's CD player and listened to music. He had thought that because the Smiths didn't have a television or stereo in the house their religion forbade them from listening to such things.

It was the time when the whole country seemed involved in the events surrounding Princess Diana's death. Mr Smith's American parents were staying with them and his wife had encountered his mother in the driveway. Mrs Smith senior told her that because there was no television or radio in her son's home, and no one was allowed to read newspapers, it was difficult for her and her husband to find out what was going on, and they felt they were missing a critical aspect of being in England. Despite the incident with the car stereo, this confirmed to John that the Smith family were indeed fundamentalists, and that he had been right all along about how they abstained from modernity. He was therefore shocked and indeed concerned that it would be an inconsiderate invasion of their religious *culture* when his wife suggested inviting Mr and Mrs Smith senior, and indeed the whole Smith family, in to watch Diana's funeral on the television. John really felt that this invitation would put the whole family in a very difficult position. It would be like inviting Muslims to eat pork. His wife said that it would be impolite to invite Mr and Mrs Smith senior alone, and that anyway they all had the choice to refuse.

John was amazed again when the whole Smith family accepted the invitation and all ten of them came into their living room, the children sitting on the floor, to watch the whole funeral. He was even more amazed when Mrs Smith later wrote his wife a note to say that they had all really appreciated the opportunity.

Deconstruction

This example shows John reducing his neighbour according to a prescribed stereotype – very much as Parisa's colleagues reduced her to a stereotype in Unit A1.1. What makes this particularly significant is that it is so easy to fall into traps like this. It is therefore extremely important to deconstruct exactly how this can happen.

It seems clear from Example A2.1.1 that John had made a mistake both about the nature of the Smith family and about how to communicate with them, whereas his wife had been successful at least to the extent of achieving significant interaction that seemed to be appreciated by both sides. In an attempt to explain why this happened we are going to explore the four interconnected concepts, some of which will be familiar, some less so, and link them with the concept of essentialism introduced in Units A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3:

- stereotype
- prejudice

- otherization
- culturism.

From stereotype to otherization

John had formed a *stereotype* based on his observation of wooden furniture, abstention from exposure to the media, austere clothing, a large family, Mr Smith's chin beard, Mrs Smith's and the daughters' long hair, put together with the popular image of the Amish presented in the Hollywood movie, *Witness*. Many argue that it is natural to form stereotypes and that they indeed help us to understand 'foreign cultures' – that they act as a template, or as an ideal type, against which we can measure the unknown. We disagree with this view. One reason is that we do not behave sufficiently rationally in intercultural dealings to be able to work objectively with such templates. A major reason for this is that stereotypes are often infected by *prejudice*, which in turn leads to *otherization*. This process is summarized in the top half of Figure 4. We have chosen the words for the bubbles in the figure carefully because this is a complex, dangerous area.

The 'foreign Other' (bubbles A and C) refers not only to different nationalities, but also to any group of people *perceived* as different – perhaps in terms of so-called ethnicity, religion, political alignment, class or caste, or gender. This is 'so-called' ethnicity because the term is particularly relative and disputed (e.g. Baumann 1996 in Unit B0.1). We also do not list culture because all the other things listed can be said to have cultures or to be cultural. Interest (bubble B) could similarly be ethnic, religious, political, class or caste, or gender. This would colour, bias or infect the way in which the foreign Other is seen. Emergent evidence (bubble B) would be based on what can be learned on the basis of deeper understanding. This is clearly very difficult to achieve, as interest of one sort or another is always with us. Attempts are made in various types of social science. Reduction (bubble C) is where the different facets, the variety of possible characteristics and the full complexity of a group of people are ignored in favour of a preferred definition. In our view, as the figure implies, stereotyping, prejudice and otherization interact with each other; however, it is the negative impact of the latter which makes the other two undesirable.

A basic feature of this process is the way in which information is brought from outside the situation, *a priori*. The reference to the movie, *Witness* (above), shows that it was images that John already had about Amish people that gave rise to his stereotype of his neighbours. (We shall explore the influence of such social representation in more detail in Theme 3.) If he had simply observed what he saw and heard of them *in situ*, without these prior images, he would have had a far more complex picture of them. To compound this, were his *a priori* negative feelings about so-called 'fundamentalist' Christians – his prejudices – so that his final otherization of his neighbours reduced them to people who would *never* watch television, would *always* think it evil and, by extension, would not *appreciate* the complexities of such *modern* phenomena as Diana's funeral. One may think, so what? Amish people *are* strange and odd, and restrict their behaviour and opt out of 'normal' life. The point is that John judged his neighbours, and categorized them, and decided what they would and would not be *before* really investigating who they were as individuals.

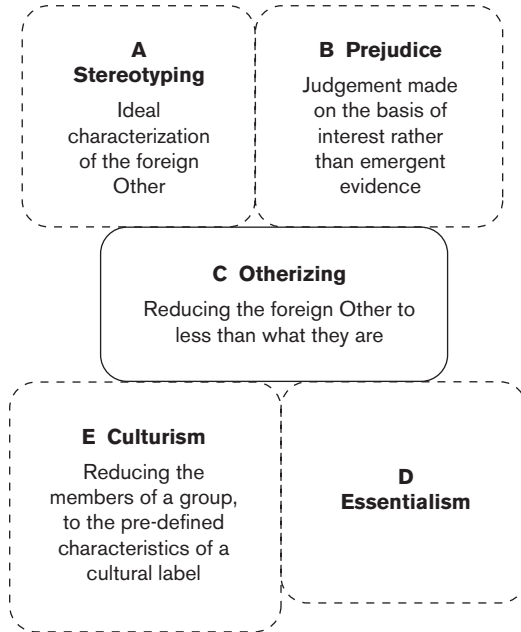


Figure 4 Constituents of otherization

Culturism

The lower half of Figure 4 reveals another aspect of otherization, which addresses the issue of culture. Following our comment regarding bubbles A and C (23), the groups of people who we characterize as the ‘foreign Other’ can be said to share between them something cultural. The problem is that ‘we’ can very easily take this too far and allow the notion of ‘culture’ to become greater than the people themselves. Just as we too easily form stereotypes which can pre-define what people are like, we can *imagine* or *reify* ‘cultures’ as objects, places and physical entities within which and by which people live (Table 1 cell i). By reification we mean to imagine something to be real when it is not. Hence, essentialism is born (bubble D). Therefore, in Example A2.1.1:

- John saw the Amish as a religious culture characterized by the stereotypical traits of austere appearance, disdain for modernity and so on, which would govern the behaviour of the Smith family. He thus saw them through the filter of ‘in Amish culture. . . .’ (Table 1 cell ix)

From essentialism there is just a small step to *culturism* (bubble E). This is similarly constructed to racism or sexism in that the imagined characteristics of the ‘culture’ (or ‘women’ or ‘Asians’) are used to define the person. Thus:

- whatever Mrs Smith did, John *explained* it as being Amish. And if she did something which did not fit the explanation, it was that she had somehow lost her culture, was no longer, or ‘not really’ Amish, or had been ‘secularized’.

Again, the reader might think this argument inconsequential, because ‘everyone knows’ that the Amish ‘are in fact like that’. Nevertheless, if one applied the same culturist rule to women, we would get:

- whatever Mrs Smith did, John *explained* it as being due to her being a woman. And if she did something which did not fit the explanation, it was that she had lost her femininity.

Communication

The disciplines for intercultural communication arising from this unit carry the same basic message as those in Unites A1.1, A1.2 and A1.3, except that here they can draw attention to the factors which help *prevent* us from misinterpreting other people’s realities. In the light of the experience of this unit, we must therefore do the following (disciplines 1–4 appear on page 10, 5–6 on page 15 and 7–9 on pages 19–20).

10. Avoid falling into the culturist trap of reducing people to less than they are – in the same way as we must avoid racist and sexist traps.

Task A2.1.1 Thinking about the Smiths



- Think of a situation you have been in that is like the Smiths example and describe it in similar detail.
- Pinpoint where the elements of otherization depicted in Figure 4 show themselves in the situation, and list the perpetrators and victims.
- What can you learn from this about intercultural communication? How might you go about conforming to the discipline described?

CULTURAL DEALING

What we project onto each other

UNIT A2.2

Experience

This unit looks at the problem of otherization on a macro scale when two communities of people come together and behave according to their images of each other. Consider this example (first used in Holliday 2002):

Example A2.2.1 Tourists and business

Agnes has joined a tour group which is travelling through North Africa visiting archaeological sites. The group is made up of German, Italian, French, Swedish and

British tourists. They stay in a small hotel near one particular site for three days. It is 30 kilometres from the nearest town, but there is a village nearby. The villagers work in the hotel and have also set up a string of small shops in which they sell local handicrafts and souvenirs.

Agnes forms a brief relationship with François. She is really amazed at herself for succumbing to his charms. She thinks it is, after all, such a cliché. She has of course seen the film *Shirley Valentine*, in which a middle-aged Englishwoman falls in love with a local restaurant owner while on holiday on a Greek island. She has never had such a casual relationship before; but her marriage is struggling and she has come away to escape. She is also sure that François, who seems a real gigolo, does this sort of thing with every European woman who comes along.

François is amazed at himself for getting involved like this. He is unmarried and has never had an affair with a woman before. He is engaged to be married, and has a high sense of personal morality. Indeed, he will not have had sex with his fiancée, and his relationship with her will have been carefully chaperoned. He has actually fallen in love with Agnes, but is at the same time smitten by remorse because he is being unfaithful to his fiancée, whom he also loves deeply. After a very short time he becomes horrified at Agnes's behaviour. She suddenly 'throws herself at him' and is readily prepared to have sex. It must after all be true what everyone says about European women – that they are loose, have no morals and will have sex with anyone.

They part in anger. She goes back to her fellow travellers and indulges more than ever in the stories of how North African men swindle tourists and mistreat their women. He goes back to his village and indulges more than ever in the stories of the corrupt West.

Deconstruction

Here we can see François and Agnes getting into a very difficult relationship made more so by a complexity of personal and cultural complications. Basic concepts here are as follows.

- When people from different backgrounds meet, a middle culture of dealing is set up within which they interact, which in turn is influenced by respective complexes of cultural baggage.
- What people see of each other is influenced by the middle culture of dealing, which may be very different to what they think they see which is a product of otherization.

Middle cultures of dealing

Figure 5 can be interpreted not in the essentialist terms of 'European culture' and 'North African culture' (Table 1 cell iii), but in terms of a far more complicated *mélange* of interacting and overlapping cultural entities (Table 1 cell vi). This is demonstrated in Figure 5. Bubbles B and D represent the small cultures of the tourists and of the villagers *while* they are trading with the tourists. These are the cultures which initially come into

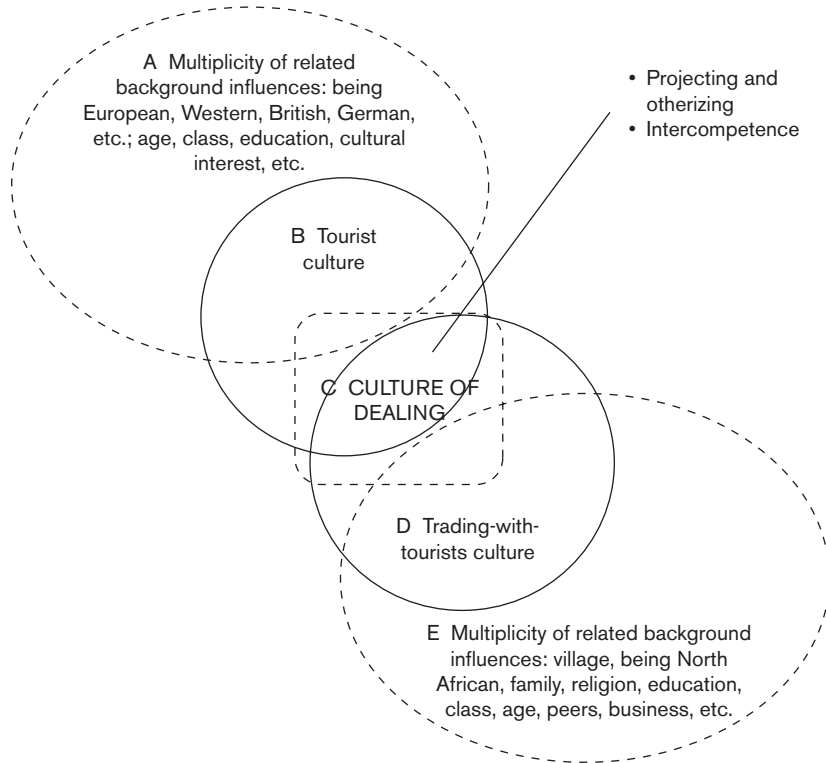


Figure 5 Culture of dealing

contact with each other and which act as the primary source of information for each group. The broader cultural influences of being European or villagers and so on are in the background in bubbles A and E. What exactly these influences, as cultural resources, might be will also depend on the specific circumstances (Unit A1.2 Figure 2). In this case, village and family might have a stronger impact on François because of their proximity, and being European on Agnes because of the group of people she is with as a tourist. The tourist culture and the trading-with-tourists culture (bubbles B and D) are more temporary and yet specific to the activities in hand. Anyone who has seen a group of tourists, among whom are their own compatriots, will recognize that they are behaving very differently (in bubble B) to when they are at home (bubble A), forming a new type cohesiveness among themselves with perhaps new artefacts such as cameras, water bottles, sun hats, backpacks and so on. At the same time, the village trading culture (in bubble D) will have different characteristics to the culture of the village itself (bubble E), with perhaps use of languages, currencies, codes of politeness and so on which are tuned to the foreign customer. This trading-with-tourists culture (in bubble D) may be seen as an extension or outcrop from the village culture (in circle E); and it will not be the only one. Similar cultures (bubble D) will grow when people go to school or university, travel to cities or deal with other people who come to the village – thus exemplifying that the village culture (bubble E) is always far from the confined exclusivity in the essentialist sense.

Bubble C, in the centre of the figure, represents a further extension of all the other cultures where the actual interaction between François and Agnes takes place. This is a culture of dealing because it is set up between the two interactants who enter into a relationship of culture-making.

We do not wish to give the impression in this model of behaviour that the cultures in bubbles B to D are ‘subcultures’ which are hierarchically subordinate, or deviant, to the respective ‘parent’ cultures (bubbles A and E). A more open-ended picture seems more appropriate, in which the ‘small cultures’ of the tourists, the village, the tourist–tourism business and so on have a multiplicity of relationships both within and transcending larger entities (Table 1 cells iii–iv). Furthermore, Figure 5 presents only one way of seeing what happens between the villagers and the tourists. Another way of seeing this might be in terms of discourses, rather than small cultures, as discussed in Unit A3.2 and by Gee in Unit B1.3. Whether these can be called discourses or cultures might depend on the degree to which they are represented by ways of talking or behaviour and artefacts.

This model of multiple cultures means that what François and Agnes actually see of each other is very much defined by the specific situation in which they meet. The cultural influences of Europe, from where Agnes comes, are only part of the picture. The culture of tourism is closer, and its influence is evidenced in Example A2.2.1 by the reference to the *Shirley Valentine* film in which the behaviour of a middle-aged English woman is changed by being away from home in an ‘exotic’ place. For François, it is the culture of trading with tourists which brings him into contact with Agnes, leaving the social influences of the village and his engagement relatively distant. When François and Agnes actually meet, it is within the very new culture of their dealing with each other that they see each other’s behaviour directly. It could be argued that in this new culture their behaviour becomes intercompetent (Holliday 2002:152) – anomalous, sometimes mixed up, still approaching the competence people achieve in longer-standing cultures, as they learn how to behave in this very new culture. Put more simply, they see each other very much out of character in this clumsy new culture.

Nevertheless, the basis upon which they *perceive*, or think they see, each other is very different. Inaccurate otherization and culturism become rampant. Although Agnes, as a tourist, is behaving differently because she is on holiday, François explains her behaviour – as a ‘loose immoral’ woman – according to the common stereotype of Europeans he brings from his village. Agnes similarly explains his behaviour – as a ‘swindler, gigolo and misogynist’ – according to the common stereotype of people who work in the bazaars of North Africa she brings from home. They both thus miss totally the fact that each of them is involved in an intense moral struggle precipitated by the strangeness of the situation in which they find themselves.

What needs to be realized here is that in a non-essentialist paradigm, we are not looking at the foreign Other as though it is locked in a separate foreign place. In all the examples so far used there are people who are operating at cultural borders. Moreover, their struggle for identity is very much connected with this border activity – how they are being seen by people who do not know them. We showed in Unit A1.3 and in Unit A2.1 that this is to do with people moving not just between different societies but also between small cultures within a particular society. Figure 6 shows that what we actually see in a person’s behaviour and what they say about themselves interacts *both* with the

cultural resources they bring with them and the new culture they encounter. Hence, Zhang's talk about Confucianism in Unit A1.2 is his projection onto the circumstances in which he finds himself in the foreign society of the master's programme.

What is particularly unfortunate here is that very often the resources we bring with us from our familiar cultural experience (right-hand bubble of the figure), and which we then project onto the unfamiliar culture which we confront (left-hand bubble) are very often stereotypes that arise from our own discourses about the Other. Then, after subsequently unsuccessful interaction with the Other, we return, like François and Agnes, to the same comfortable discourses – hence the two-way arrows in Figure 6.

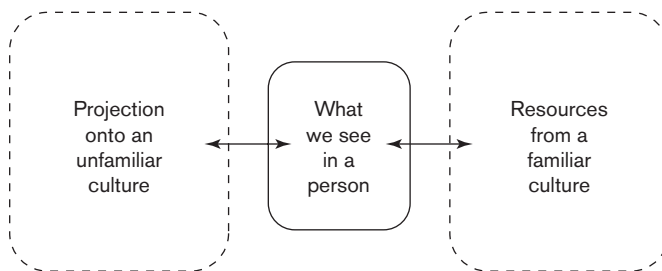


Figure 6 Identity on the cusp

Communication

As a result of this unit it is possible to build on the disciplines from Unit A1.3, which dealt with communication as cultural negotiation. From our understanding of the complex cultures surrounding communication, we need to do the following (see other disciplines listed previously).

11. Be aware that what happens between yourself and others is influenced very much by the environment within which you are communicating and your own preoccupations.

Because of this, we need to do the following.

12. Become aware of our own preoccupations in order to understand what it is that people from other backgrounds are responding to.

This in effect means that we need to research ourselves just as much as we research those who are strange to us. This links with the disciplines in Unit A1.1 about building a thick description of the whole communication scenario.



Task A2.2.1 Thinking about cultural dealing

- Think of a situation you have been in where there is an element of cultural dealing and describe it, using Figure 5 to help you.
- Evaluate Figure 5 and try to improve on it so that it fits the situation you have described better.
- Explain how you can better understand one or more people in the situation with the help of Figure 6 and the disciplines listed.
- What can you learn from this about intercultural communication?

UNIT A2.3

POWER AND DISCOURSE

We must be careful what we say

Experience

This unit considers how careful we must all be when talking about and to people who we consider to be Other, because we may be unaware of the power our words may carry. Indirectly, the unit will consider the issue of political correctness, a much-contested concept. Consider Example A2.3.2.

Example A2.3.1 Understanding supervisor

Jeremy is a lecturer in an Australian university. He was very pleased when he heard he was going to supervise a black student from South Africa. Several years ago he had been involved in a three-year science education project in secondary schools in South Africa, and he felt he knew the place more than his colleagues. He felt he would clearly be the best person to help Jabu to get through her research project. He had also read quite a few things on cultural differences, which interested him a great deal.

Jabu first met Jeremy during a class he was teaching on introducing science research. She was the only 'overseas' student there and felt quite angry when, during introductions, he announced to all the other student that he knew her 'context' very well. She was not sure whether it was something about his tone of voice – as though he was speaking about someone who had a handicap of some sort – or his speed of voice – as though she might not understand normal English – or that she was being separated out from all the other students as needing some sort of special attention – which annoyed her. Or perhaps it was that Jeremy was making out that he understood her and was on her side. What could he possibly know about her and her background which would give him this right!? Even her closest friends at home did not presume they knew her so well that they could speak for her like this – except perhaps her mother, and every daughter knows that story!