

A Conversation with Carlos

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Introduction

Culture has existed since the beginning of time. Cross cultural communication has often been a struggle as war and hurt often marked cross cultural communication. As time has passed though, communication has improved due to language barriers being broken and with technology, people can learn about other cultures at the click of a button. Cultures still battle with miscommunication even with the help of technology. The communication patterns of Colombian and American cultures will be analyzed alongside the interactions of two strangers from these prospective cultures.

A Stranger

A stranger is someone who is from another group and might have a low degree of familiarity. The stranger that I interacted with is a man named Carlos. Carlos is a 22-year-old male who was born and raised in Bogota, Colombia. He moved to Mississippi alone when he was 18 in order to play tennis and receive a college education. When he arrived stateside, he spoke zero English. Over the past four years, he has learned the English language and can almost speak fluently. He attended Hinds Community College to achieve his associate's degree but in May of 2022, Carlos will graduate with a degree in Accounting through Mississippi College. His goals with his degree are to go back to Colombia to take over the family business. Speaking of family, Carlos has two sisters, his parents, and his grandmother in his life.

Colombian Culture

To correctly interpret Carlos's message, an understanding of Colombian culture was necessary. Columbia has a high- context culture, meaning that people understand the values without needing to be told. (Colombian culture) While they may not tell you something directly, they are generally open about their emotions. They often speak at a high volume but are attentive

when listening while rarely interrupting. (Colombian culture) Due to being high- context, a person from Columbia is also likely to be indirect. Instead of saying “no,” they might say “I will see what I can do.”(Colombian culture) In moments of silence, they will often use forms of humor or sarcasm to fill the void of conversation. (Colombian culture)

Every culture has nonverbal traditions in addition to the verbal. Columbia is known to be a very tactile culture, meaning that they often use physical touch in everyday conversation. (Colombian culture) To emphasize a point made, one might hit the other’s knee or clap the shoulder. To show appreciation, they might hold the shoulders of the other person. In their culture, they often lean in during conversation and keep direct eye contact as often as possible.

American Culture

America has an interesting dynamic involving its culture and the influence it has on communication. America is considered to be a low- context culture and is known for being direct in communication. (American culture) They often get directly to the point instead of beating around the bush. Because of this directness, Americans are considered to be quite assertive. (American culture) Americans are quite quick to boast of their achievements and are able to speak for themselves instead of being assigned a role by another. (American culture) Americans also don’t mind being louder in public areas but do not enjoy random loud or emotional outbursts by others. They often miss sarcasm or understatements. (American culture)

Considering nonverbal communication, America is similar to its verbal cues. The nonverbal cues tend to be direct, but still sensitive to others. Americans deeply value eye contact as it conveys trust and honesty. (American culture) Americans tend to not be very tactile with those that are not family or close friends. (American culture)An uninvited touch can be perceived as inappropriate and even sexual misconduct. (American culture) A good way to avoid this

miscommunication is to not invade their personal space. An American most likely will not say anything if approached but will simply back up. (American culture)

Comparison

Colombian and American cultures have similar threads but are also pretty different. While Americans value direct communication, Colombians value the art of subtleness in their verbal exchange. Colombians enjoy closeness, not abiding by any personal space rules. Americans are uncomfortable when their personal space is violated by another. Colombian culture is highlighted by bright communication, making the most of what is in front of them. America, on the other hand, sticks to rigid time restraints. Colombian culture rarely interrupts, identifying value in the other party, while American culture is okay with interrupting in order to assert dominance in a relationship.

American and Colombian cultures share some similarities. Loud and expressive personal relationships are characteristics of both cultures. They also both find sustained eye contact to be a sign of loyalty and a lack of eye contact is a sign of guilt.

The Interaction

Carlos and I met through the Business school, as we were in a class together. At first, we didn't talk much. But as the semester progressed, he made a point to begin to talk to everyone in the class. He would come in and say "Hello" to everyone. At a football game, he would come up to me and start a conversation. Our interactions took place around campus without planning, as I never told him about the assignment.

From the first interaction, I could tell that Carlos simply loved life. He was the life of the party, even in the classroom. In most Business school classes, the average student would come in, sit down, take notes, then leave. Carlos approached class differently. In class, he would be

animated and would joke around. This animated fellow was not only in the classroom but his character every day.

During our next few interactions, I slowly began to understand the things that makeup Carlos and his culture. He loved his family and spoke about them often. He came to America to earn a degree to go home and help his family's business. Carlos would tell me the lessons his dad taught him, such as "take chances" or "not everything has to be serious." Carlos also spoke often about his travels around the world. He would tell me about where he has been and where he wants to go. His plans were often made spontaneously and involved his family or friends going with him. Carlos is always looking for an adventure. He said, "If I hear a neighbor playing music, why would I get mad? I should get up and dance."

Carlos was also passionate about his Catholic faith and asked me questions about my Christian faith. He would bless me in Mary's name or pray to Mary while we were together. He would tell me stories about going to the cathedrals back home and how they were beautiful in design. A typical church service and confession were described to me. He seemed eager to learn about my religion and often asked questions about my beliefs and my church.

There were a few cultural norms that Carlos and I had to clarify. Two big issues that arose between us were the idea of personal space and the directness of our verbal language. I struggled with his idea of personal space being smaller than mine and he struggled with my bluntness. He often just laughed when I was blunt, but he would tell me later on that he struggled with it. I often felt anxious due to his lack of personal space and would politely point it out to him. He would also always want a high five or a fist bump. When we addressed these inconsistencies in culture, our friendship and the trust we had for one another deepened.

Dissection of Interactions

The first thing that stood out to me from Carlos and my interactions was the concept of communication reward valence. In the beginning, the valence was negative because I did not know Carlos very well. The more that Carlos and I communicated while learning his communication style, the more positive the valence became. By the end of our assigned interactions, the violations became positive because I understood that the violation is just how he interacts with others. I struggled with his idea of personal space very much at the beginning of our relationship, and it made me mistake his intentions. But as I learned more about Carlos and his culture, I realized that the lack of personal space was just how he was raised. Once I learned that the lack of personal space was interest and concentration in what was being said, the reward became positive.

Another concept that became clear to me was the idea of individualism and collectivism. I come from a more individualist culture while Carlos comes from a collectivist culture. This concept can be seen in one of our first conversations. I was studying for a test and he approached me while asking me what I was doing. When I told him that I was studying, I expected him to say goodbye and keep going. Instead, he stopped and asked for clarification. He noticed during his time in the United States that people study so much and often place their studies before everything else. When I told him that most people just want good grades and to be successful in their careers, Carlos was shocked. He said that passing his classes is okay as long as he gets to enjoy life. Being the best was not important to him because by sacrificing that status, he got to participate in what he wanted to do, thus enjoying life.

One thing that truly surprised me was the outcome of the trade-off hypothesis. Usually, in collectivist cultures, the self liking is high and the self competence is low. With Carlos, both were high. He loves himself and not in a self absorbed way. He loves the person that he has

become and he is fully confident in his ability. Carlos doesn't rely on others but does the work himself. This response surprised me because he goes against the grain.

Something that Carlos said he struggled with when he first came to the States was time, or the temporality. In Columbia, he said that he showed up whenever and often did many things at one time. Columbia is a polychronic culture, except in business, which is pretty timely. But when he came to America, he was told that being late was not an option and he should keep his mind focused on one thing at a time. America is a monochronic culture. He said that as time went on, he adjusted to this mentality but when he goes home, he instantly slips back into the polychronic mindset with which he was raised.

Conclusion

Despite our hardships, Carlos and I had a blossoming friendship by the end of our interactions. By clearly communicating our struggles and clarifying our cultural differences, we could have more meaningful conversations due to the adaptation that could take place. Due to the clarification provided by Carlos and online resources, I have a better understanding of his communication styles and he with my style. We no longer have big communication problems but instead can focus on the message being relayed.

References

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