Chapter 3: Communication, Culture, and Identity

**Chapter Summary**

Our cultural background shapes our identity, our communication practices, and our responses to others. Intercultural communication refers to communication between and among individuals and groups whose cultural backgrounds differ. As the populations of countries become more diverse, communicators today need to have knowledge of others' cultural values and practices to inform their communication.

The United States is a heterogeneous mix of various cultures, with 2.4 percent of the population identifying with more than one race. We can experience intercultural communication at the national level or at the small scale of a neighborhood. The United States generally supports cultural newcomers, including Latinos, the fastest growing cultural group.

Family, friends, and the media teach us culture. The national culture is made up of numerous co-cultures, or cultures within cultures, membership in which is determined by factors such as sexual identity, gender, and race. Cultures and co-cultures create a sense of community for members.

Culture has four dimensions. Cultures vary in the degree that they desire predictability (the uncertainty avoidance dimension) and how much they show respect for status (the distribution of power dimension). They also differ on what they value, such as competitiveness or quality of life (the masculinity-femininity dimension) and individual or group accomplishments (the individualism-collectivism dimension). Another important ingredient in culture is context; members of high-context cultures draw the meaning of the message from the surroundings, whereas people in low-context cultures derive the meaning from the message itself.

In today's world, there are six reasons, or imperatives, to study intercultural communication. The technology imperative shows that technology makes communication with those in other countries easier than ever before. The demographic imperative recognizes that the United States is a symphony of cultures that should accommodate and appreciate each other. The economic imperative states that all societies--and their businesses--are interconnected in a global village. The peace imperative says that looking at world affairs from other countries' perspectives is a step in the right direction, especially if you have taken advantage of the self-awareness imperative, which encourages us to have a clear understanding of our own worldview. Finally, according to the ethical imperative, we have an obligation to ensure that cultural behaviors are depicted in the context of cultural values.

The chapter discusses five obstacles to intercultural communication. Ethnocentrism makes us judge other cultures using the standards of our own culture. As we learned in Chapter 2, stereotyping is an often misguided process that associates certain traits with individuals just because they are part of a group. Anxiety influences our communication;
feeling like a member of an in-group or out-group can affect our relationships. Nonverbal behaviors differ across cultures. Finally, if we assume we are similar to those in other cultures, we don't appreciate the differences between us, and the reverse is also true.

You can make positive choices to improve your intercultural understanding, including knowing and eliminating your biases, tolerating the unknown, practicing cultural respect, educating yourself, being prepared for consequences, and relating to the individual instead of the culture. Intercultural communication requires patience, knowledge, sensitivity, and respect. We hope that you work toward establishing and maintaining intercultural relationships with the information we outline in this chapter.