

6 Continuum Principle

‘Having It Both Ways’



Key Theme:	Distance
Problem Question:	How can we demonstrate that intercultural communication combines both specific and general meaning?
Objective:	To help you understand how people from different cultures form one continuous space

Key Concepts: Analog, binary, compactness, connectedness, digital, global cultural dimensions, femininity, high–low context communication, individualism–collectivism, masculinity, ‘O(organic)-type organizations,’ masculinity–femininity, ‘M(mechanistic)-type organizations,’ power distance, uncertainty avoidance, topology.

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1 Introducing the Problem Question

In the previous chapter, the levels and forms of commensurability were identified. Now we know that intercultural communication can, and must, be measured according to some general standards. You might be somewhat confused, though. On the one hand, cultural knowledge is situated, every culture

looking at the world from a specific point of view; hence all cultural knowledge is different. On the other hand, cultural knowledge comes down to some general standards; hence, it is the same. Is there a contradiction here?

In this chapter, thus, we take up the following Problem Question: ‘How can we demonstrate that intercultural communication combines both specific and general meaning?’

2 Global Cultural Dimensions: How Many?

The word ‘dimension’ shares the same Proto-Indo-European root *me-, meaning ‘to measure,’ with the word ‘commensurability.’ So let’s take a closer look at the dimensions used for measuring different cultures. Such dimensions are often labeled ‘**global cultural dimensions**’ because they apply to all existing cultures.

For instance, Emiko Kashima and Yoshihisa Kashima (1998) discuss the following dimensions: Individualism–Collectivism; Power Distance; Uncertainty Avoidance; Masculinity–Femininity; Integration; Confucian Work Dynamism; Human Heartedness; Moral Discipline; Conservatism; Affective Autonomy; Intellectual Autonomy; Hierarchy; Egalitarian Commitment; Mastery; Harmony; Achievement; Universalism; Paternalism; and Involvement.

Charles Hampden–Turner and Fons Trompenaars (2000) isolate the following dimensions of cultural variability: Universalism–Particularism; Individualism–Communitarianism; Specificity–Diffusion; Achieved Status–Ascribed Status; Inner Direction–Outer Direction; and Sequential Time–Synchronous Time.

The so-called ‘Big Five’ dimensions, linking personality and culture, include the variables of Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Marsella et al., 2000).

In other research (Keating et al., 2002), yet more dimensions are proposed, such as Performance Orientation (do cultures reward achievement of excellence?) and Future Orientation (do cultures encourage future-oriented behaviors, like planning or investing?).

All these dimensions are concerned with how people solve different tasks; for example, how they deal with time (Future Orientation), with work (Confucian Work Dynamism), with inequality (Hierarchy, Power Distance), and with groups (Individualism–Collectivism).

Below, we briefly discuss the main cultural dimensions based on the research conducted by Geert Hofstede, a well-known Dutch social psychologist. While Hofstede’s research is sometimes criticized for being developed within an organizational setting and for its Western or Eurocentric orientation (Calori, 1994; Degabriele, 2000), we should admit that “the importance of Hofstede’s work cannot be overestimated” (Gannon, 2001, p. 51) and that his “large scale empirical study in 40 countries retains benchmark status” (Keating et al., 2002, p. 634). Overall, “Hofstede’s work on culture is the most widely cited in existence” (Jones, 2007).

Although sometimes Hofstede identifies six dimensions (Hofstede, 2011), we focus on the five that are most often discussed in intercultural communication texts: Individualism–Collectivism, Power Distance, Masculinity–Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, and High–Low Context Communication. These dimensions are concerned with the following tasks that all people face: how to respond to the group, how to respond to authority, how to respond to the other gender, how to respond to ambiguity, and how to respond to message, as such.

Individualism–Collectivism. The concepts of Individualism and Collectivism describe the degree to which people are integrated into groups. In individualistic cultures, “the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and the immediate family” (Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 37). In collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, “people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups; often their extended families (with uncles, aunts, and grandparents) continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 37). Based on Hofstede’s research, such countries as the United States and France are usually included in the category of individualistic cultures, while such countries as Brazil and Mexico are usually included in the category of collectivistic cultures. In individualistic cultures, behaviors are aimed at self-realization, while in collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, people have an emotional dependence on institutions and organizations, for they provide security and reward loyalty; in such cultures, behaviors aimed at self-realization may be considered selfish. Subtle clashes between people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures are revealed, for instance, in interviews for entry-level positions in Anglo–American multinational corporations. Chinese applicants from Singapore, for example, tend to focus on the group or family (Wong, 2000). Unless interviewers are aware of this tendency, they may not hire a strong candidate, failing to differentiate between cultural background and potential to perform work duties successfully.

Power Distance. The concept of Power Distance describes the degree to which people accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. In every culture, inequality exists between people as far as social status, prestige, wealth, etc. Hence, high power distance and low power distance cultures are identified. For instance, such countries as India and Brazil are usually included in the category of high power distance, while such countries as Finland and Israel are usually included in the category of low power distance cultures. In high power distance cultures, people tend to accept a hierarchical order with an established authority that needs little justification. In low power distance, on the other hand, people tend to search equality and question authority, demanding justification for any existing inequalities. In high power distance cultures, for instance, conspicuous consumption is often used to display power and status, while in low power distance cultures, individuals who occupy positions of authority try to minimize inequalities between themselves and less powerful individuals, avoiding conspicuous

display of wealth. For example, the success of the empowering practices by the U.S. based corporations in other countries depends on the degree of power distance in those cultures since empowerment implies the sharing of authority. It was found out (Marchese, 2001) that the empowerment practices by a U.S. based company were quite successful in Poland, while the Indian employees had negative reaction to such practices. Therefore, if the company decides to continue with such practices, these practices may cause more harm than good.

Masculinity–Femininity. The concepts of Masculinity–Femininity describe the degree to which individuals' gender roles are emphasized. Such countries as Japan and Mexico are usually included in the category of masculine cultures, while such countries as Taiwan and Brazil in the category of feminine cultures. In masculine cultures, people tend to emphasize such traditional roles as assertiveness, achievement, ambition, performance, and competitiveness. In feminine cultures, people tend to emphasize such traditional roles as modesty, nurturing, and caring. For instance, people from feminine cultures, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, would expect more government policies that ease the burden of leaving one's job to bear a child and returning to work. If such policies and services are not sufficient or altogether absent in the masculine culture of their spouse, this may put pressure on the intercultural relationship.

Uncertainty Avoidance. The concept of Uncertainty Avoidance describes the degree to which people feel uncomfortable in ambiguous, unstructured situations "defined as novel, unknown, surprising, or different from usual" (Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 38). People in uncertainty-avoiding cultures are intolerant of such unstructured situations and try to control ambiguity at all costs because "uncertainty-avoiding cultures try to minimize the possibility of such situations by adhering to strict laws and rules, safety and security measures" (Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 38). People in uncertainty-accepting cultures, on the other hand, are tolerant of ambiguity and often welcome it. In other words,

uncertainty-accepting cultures are more tolerant of behavior and opinions that differ from their own; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level they are relativist, allowing many currents to flow side by side.

(Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 38)

Such countries as Japan and France are usually included in the category of uncertainty-avoiding cultures, while such countries as the United States and Finland are in the category of uncertainty-accepting cultures. People in uncertainty-accepting cultures, for instance, are more tolerant of foreigners.

High–Low Context Communication. The concept of High–Low Context, based on Hall's ideas (1976), refers to how people construct messages. Every message is made up of information, called 'text,' vested in a

language code, and everything else that surrounds the message, called ‘context,’ that includes physical surrounding, but also social, political, economic, and other factors. The concept of High–Low Context describes the degree to which information in a message is contextualized, and how. In this sense,

a high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.

(Hall, 1976, p. 91)

People in high-context cultures do not emphasize the use of written or oral forms of expression, relying more on context, such as knowledge of relationships, and so they expect more from their interlocutors who must put all the pieces of the interaction in place. Such countries as the United States and Germany are usually included in the category of low-context communication cultures, while such countries as Japan and China are typically in the category of high-context communication cultures.

These two types of communication are illustrated very well in the training video *Crosstalk: Performance Appraising Across Cultures*, featuring a series of goal-setting performance-appraisal interviews between individuals from low-context and high-context cultures. In this video, individuals from low-context cultures start their interview

with a conclusion: I did well during this past year, and here are the actions justifying this self-appraisal. In contrast, the high-context subordinates refuse to offer an initial conclusion and merely describe the situation during the past year and the activities they undertook in response to it; this description should be so accurate that the conclusion naturally emerges, and it is the responsibility of the superior to decide whether the performance warrants a salary increase based on this description and other facts known to him or her.

(Gannon, 2001, p. 28)

It is important to understand all these global dimensions for successful intercultural communication. For instance, if you work as a financial consultant, you should remember that these dimensions are a factor in cultures’ risk of international stock exchanges; for example, cultures where “people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place that needs no justification, are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate family, and are tolerant of ambiguity, have strong conditions for high systematic risk” (Riahi-Belkaoui, 1998, p. 107). Similarly, if you work for an international advertising agency, the knowledge of the main cultural dimensions will help you to use the right rhetorical appeal in your message. For instance,

in tailoring your message for uncertainty-accepting cultures, you may stress adventure, while for high-power distance cultures, you may stress the ornamental and status character of the product (Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996). Recently, implications of these cultural dimensions have been discussed for global work-family research (Shockley et al., 2018) and for different kinds of leadership in education (Bissessar, 2018).

Now that we've briefly looked at these cultural dimensions, let's try and answer the question posed earlier: 'how many'? If we simply count all the different terms, the answer then will be ten dimensions: (1) Individualism; (2) Collectivism; (3) High Power Distance; (4) Low Power Distance; (5) Masculinity; (6) Femininity; (7) Uncertainty-Avoiding; (8) Uncertainty-Accepting; (9) High-Context Communication; (10) Low-Context Communication. However, each dimension is made up of two terms, and so the answer then is five dimensions: (1) Individualism-Collectivism; (2) High Power Distance-Low Power Distance; (3) Masculinity-Femininity; (4) Uncertainty-Avoiding-Uncertainty-Accepting; (5) High-Context Communication-Low-Context Communication. An important clue was provided earlier when it was mentioned that the global cultural dimensions are concerned with how people solve five specific tasks: (1) how people respond to the group (Individualism-Collectivism dimension); (2) how people respond to authority (High Power Distance-Low Power Distance dimension); (3) how people respond to the other gender (Masculinity-Femininity dimension); (4) how people respond to ambiguity (Uncertainty-Avoiding-Uncertainty-Accepting dimension); and (5) how people respond to a message, as such (High-Context Communication-Low-Context Communication dimension). Another clue was the use of such expressions as 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand,' suggesting that one concept, e.g., Masculinity, cannot exist without the other, e.g., Femininity.

And now is the time to introduce Continuum Principle of intercultural communication.

3 Introducing the Continuum Principle

Let's now formulate, based on the discussion above, the sixth principle of intercultural communication—the Continuum Principle. We will isolate three parts that make up this principle. Each part deals with the shared and continuous nature of intercultural interactions. First, we will discuss why it is important to overcome binary thinking; next, we will present intercultural continuum as a form of digital communication; finally, we will present intercultural continuum as a form of analogic communication. We will discuss each part separately and then formulate the Continuum Principle, as a whole.

3.1 *The Digital and the Analog*

Let's start by noting that human communication messages "can either be represented by a likeness, such as a drawing, or they can be referred to by

a name . . . These two types of communication . . . are . . . equivalent to the concepts of the analogic and the digital respectively” (Watzlawick et al., 1967, pp. 61–62). The concept of continuum cannot be understood without knowing and understanding these two concepts.

The word **‘digital’** goes back to Latin ‘digitus,’ meaning ‘finger’; it refers to something distinct or discrete, e.g., “separated, like the scattered pebbles on a beach or the leaves on a tree” (Bell, 2005, p. 13). The digital deals in abstract representation: each digit can be viewed as a ‘name’ representing a certain meaning. In this sense, “words are similar to digits; they have specific beginning and ending points and arbitrarily represent something else” (Neuliep, 1996, p. 296). As we all know, the digital is often found in the displays of clocks or watches; here, the flow of time is broken into discrete and finite elements, presented as a row of numbers coded from 0 to 9, making it possible for us to mark and predict time.

The word **‘analog’** goes back to Greek ‘analogos,’ meaning ‘proportionate, according to proportion’; it suggests comparison and thus ratio. The analog can be equated with constructs that are similar to something else; in this sense, meaning is represented by a likeness to something else. Whereas the digital deals in abstract representation, the analog deals in physical correspondence; meaning is presented as continuous patterns resembling reality. The analog is based on likeness, emphasizing such meanings of the word ‘like’ as ‘having the same characteristics or qualities as; similar to’, and ‘feeling attraction toward or taking pleasure in,’ e.g., ‘liking’ something or someone on Facebook. The analog is found in the displays of clocks or watches indicating the time with hands that point to hours and minutes. Here, the time is read by observing the positions and relationship of the hands, which approximate an experience of time’s continuous movement, such as the sun’s movement.

Figure 6.1 shows two stop watches—one digital and one analog.



Figure 6.1 Example of digital and analog *Source: Author*

The digital and the analog are parallel to the two conceptualizations of time—monochromic and polychromic, respectively. As mentioned earlier, people from cultures with the monochromic time orientation emphasize the compartmentalization and segmentation of measurable units of time, while people from cultures with the polychronic orientation stress involvement of people, focusing on the tasks at hand. In this light, “time in many non-Western societies has been described as *analog* rather than digital” (Punnett, 2018, p. 195). Unlike polychronic time, which focuses more on the interpersonal relations and less on pre-set schedules or clocks, monochronic time can be measured in regulated units. It was the mechanical clock that “dissociated time from human events and helped create the belief in an independent world of mathematically measurable sequences” (Mumford, 2010, p. 15). As a result, in many industrial societies

abstract time became the new medium of existence. Organic functions themselves were regulated by it: one ate, not upon feeling hungry, but when prompted by the clock; one slept, not when one was tired, but when the clock sanctioned it.

(Mumford, 2010, p. 17)

The digital and the analog can also be seen operating within the two kinds of organizations—‘**O (organic)-type organizations**’ and ‘**M (mechanistic)-type organizations**.’ People in the former focus more on paying attention to all surrounding information in an analog manner, reminiscent of high-context communication, while people in the latter perceive information in a digital manner similar to those operating in low-context cultures might. We can see “that analogue and digital mindsets are strongly influenced by culture and are fundamental to the way people understand and perceive the world as well as communicate with one another” (Noma & Crossman, 2012, p. 124).

Several points need to be emphasized in the discussion of the digital and the analog. First, “it is important to realize that the analog and the digital do not originate as properties of technological objects such as the computers” (Buckley, 2014, p. 8). As noted earlier, these terms go back to the ancient Greek; it was only in the middle of the previous century that they began to be used in the computing sense. Second, these two concepts do not refer to some random phenomena; rather, “the analog and the digital are processes immanent to relationships within and between bodies and things and are important for debating human conduct and life” (Buckley, 2014, p. 8). In other words, the analog and the digital cannot be separated from communication, for they are inherent to our existence. And, third, when we hear today about new digital technologies or digital media, it is necessary to remember that “the digital does not take over and nullify the analog . . . on the contrary, the analog and the digital overlap continuously” (Buckley, 2014, p. 9). Although it may appear perfect, without the analog communication the digital communication is in fact lifeless and devoid of change.

The digital and the analog highlight two sides of communication: the former places emphasis on discreteness, abstraction, and efficiency, while the latter—on resemblance, relations, and continuity.

3.2 *Continuum as Topological Space*

You must have heard the word ‘continuum’ used in expressions such as ‘it must be viewed on a continuum’ or ‘it is only one side of the continuum.’ But have you really thought about what ‘continuum’ means? The concept of continuum is extremely useful for our understanding of intercultural communication.

Continuum can be understood as a topological space that has certain characteristics. **Topology** is defined as “the study of the properties of geometric configurations invariant under transformation by continuous mapping” (Morris, 1982, p. 1355). Don’t let this definition scare you; when we speak of something as a topological space, we simply mean that something remains stable and identical to itself (invariant) under change, i.e., it is continuously transformed yet remains the same. To understand continuum better, let’s briefly discuss its two main characteristics—**connectedness** and compactness.

First of all, a continuum is a connected space. To put it simply, continuum is but a number of parts all connected with one another. And, second, this space must be compact or bounded. **Compactness** means that a continuum is a closed space; for instance, a straight line is an example of a continuum that is connected, but not closed (compact).

Thus, a continuum is a connected and compact space—“a continuous extent, succession, or whole, no part of which can be distinguished from neighboring parts except by arbitrary division” (Morris, 1982, p. 289). You may be familiar with the Likert scale, which is a good example of continuum. The scale was invented by Rensis Likert, a renowned social scientist, who designed it to measure attitudes or opinions ranging from ‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree.’ There can be any number of options between these two extremes.

While the Likert scale is one of the main tools used in public opinion research, we can construct a continuum showing our attitudes to the Other, often found in the field of intercultural communication. In the process of intercultural communication, we all respond to the Other’s actions, developing certain attitudes. The two main parts of the ‘Attitudes to Other’ continuum are easy to identify: the most negative on one side that can be labeled ‘Discrimination,’ and the most positive on the other side that can be labeled ‘Empathy’ (see Figure 6.2). Discrimination refers to a biased action when people from a different culture are treated disadvantageously; unfortunately, we know too many examples of discrimination such as racism, sexism, and ageism. A less negative point is represented by disparagement, derogating, or discrediting the Other. People who have such negative attitudes often do not want to admit this even to themselves let alone others. As a result, they engage

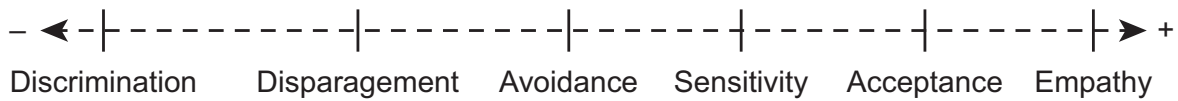


Figure 6.2 Example of ‘Attitudes to Other’ continuum *Source: Author*

in relatively effortless behaviors such as donating a small amount of money to persuade others (and themselves) that their attitude is not that negative. Such behaviors are considered to be a form of tokenism (Brislin, 1993); usually, they fail to conceal the fact that the attitude toward the Other is still negative. Finally, a third negative point is represented by avoidance, which is simply staying away from the Other. This attitude is still negative because it does not reduce the distance between one’s culture and another culture. Often, such an attitude is manifested in the so-called “arm’s-length prejudice” (Brislin, 1993, p. 191). This term speaks for itself: one draws a negative line between one’s culture and another culture, holding it at arm’s length.

The first positive point on this continuum is represented by sensitivity where one is already susceptible to the circumstances of the Other. This is a very positive step: one is now capable of admitting the Other into one’s world. Another positive point on the continuum is represented by the attitude of acceptance, which can be identified with reception of the Other and its approval. There is an important difference between sensitivity and acceptance; one may be sensitive to another culture, while not approving of some of its practices. However, if one’s attitude is that of sensitivity, intercultural interaction has a much better chance of success because differences are discussed openly and not avoided; they do not cause animosity or discrimination. Finally, the most positive point on the continuum is represented by empathy—“understanding so intimate that feelings, thoughts, and motives of one are readily comprehended by another” (Morris, 1982, p. 428). At this point, one is not simply sensitive to and accepting the Other, but fully relates to that culture. This point, of course, is never completely reached because it is only one end of the continuum and cannot exist without the other end.

It is necessary to emphasize that all these attitudes—discrimination, disparagement, avoidance, sensitivity, acceptance, and empathy—are names that can be seen as digits along the same continuum.

We isolated six names—discrimination, disparagement, avoidance, sensitivity, acceptance, and empathy—that form the ‘Attitude to Other’ continuum. In other research, you may find a different continuum; for example, Milton Bennet (1986) isolates the following stages: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. This continuum, though, can be represented by fewer or more names, including, e.g., animosity, awareness, etc. No matter how complex, the continuum is never complete because new names can be created; a continuum is a topological space that is infinitely

divisible into parts. In other words, “a continuum consists of a continuous succession of components” (Bondi, 1964, p. 49)—distinct and separate parts all related to one another and each representing a certain degree of the same meaning.

3.3 *Beyond Binary Thinking*

The simplest form of digital distinction is a binary opposition, which divides everything into two separate entities. The **binary** view goes back to the logic of Aristotle who formulated the Law of Excluded Middle, which states that every truth value is either true or false; e.g., the expression ‘tertium non datur,’ meaning ‘no third possibility is given.’ We’re all familiar with such binary oppositions as ‘all/nothing,’ ‘either/or,’ and ‘on/off,’ which are ubiquitous and seem natural. Indeed,

this binary thinking pattern has a lot to do with how the brain works. Any stimulus that enters our central nervous system is immediately relayed in two directions towards the cerebral cortex for higher thinking process, and the amygdala—our fear detective device. The interesting thing is that, despite being activated at the same time, the amygdala decides whether the object/or the person is safe or threatening before the cortex has even managed to figure out what the object/or who the person actually is. This “quick and dirty” assessment helps humans beings survive based on snap judgment, but it also means that evolution has created a neural support for binary reaction of “good or bad.”

(Nguyen-Phuong-Mai, 2017)

As you can see, the binary view is grounded in neurology and helps people to reduce complexity. We like seeing things as either black or white since such a view is so clear: the world is made up of either friends or enemies, cultures are seen as either modern (‘good’) or primitive (‘bad’), etc. No surprisingly, it is not easy for us to come to terms with the idea of two concepts existing together. You may remember from the previous chapter, though, that the body and the mind cannot be separated since both contribute to constructing and interpreting meaning. Similarly, even though we can talk separately about the right or left hemispheres of the brain, in reality both are needed for us to function normally; their joint activity (communication, in a way) allows us to be creative and solve various tasks. And, of course, we can speak separately of different cultures, yet every culture can understand itself only through the eyes of another culture, as we discussed in the first chapter.

We should avoid seeing the world only in terms of two separate entities, whether they are the brain hemispheres, global cultural dimensions, or cultures themselves. We should start seeing the world in a more complex way—in terms of ‘both/and.’ It must be emphasized that there is nothing

inherently wrong with binary oppositions, as such. This tradition of binary thinking forms a structural foundation for all cultures. Therefore, it is more appropriate to speak about going beyond binary oppositions rather than calling for overcoming or defeating them. The foundation of binary oppositions stays in place, but the view of the world becomes more complex as it comes to include a variety of the grey zones.

The Continuum Principle builds upon the ideas expressed by the Commensurability Principle, showing that intercultural communication is literally commensurable, i.e., measurable in terms of distances between different parts. For example, based on Hofstede's research, it is possible to look at a representative number of similar behaviors and calculate a collective cultural score. Hofstede used the data from multiple questionnaires on people's basic values and beliefs and

included such questions as "How important are each of the following to you in an ideal job?" followed by a list of 14 job characteristics such as earnings, job security, challenge, freedom, cooperation, and so forth. In addition . . . judgments were asked about general issues at work, such as "Competition among employees usually does more harm than good." Employees were asked to rate their responses from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

(Hofstede & Bond, 2001, p. 36)

Average scores were calculated for 53 countries for the meanings of the cultural dimensions, discussed earlier; for instance, France's individualism score is 71, while Brazil's individualism score is 38. It is possible to place these (and other) cultures along the Individualism–Collectivism continuum in accordance with their scores. France's position, for example, is characterized by the score of 71 on Individualism (and, respectively, 29 on Collectivism), while Brazil's position is characterized by the score of 38 on Individualism (and, respectively, 62 on Collectivism). In other words, France is a more individualistic culture, while Brazil is a more collectivistic culture. While this global cultural dimension is initially divided into two parts—"individualistic" and "collectivistic," the line dividing these two parts is itself a point where *both* parts intersect and so part of the whole meaningful space of "individualism–collectivism." The concept of continuum, therefore, allows us to stop seeing the world only in terms of two separate entities, providing us with a more complex vision that sees *both* individualistic *and* collectivistic sides of the picture, at the same time.

When we look at a continuum as a topological space consisting of parts, each of which contains other parts, it is tempting to argue that, because no part can be distinguished from neighboring parts except by arbitrary division, there is little difference between various parts along a continuum. This argument is sometimes called "The Bald Man Fallacy." For example, advocates for the legalization of drugs may argue that many drugs, such as

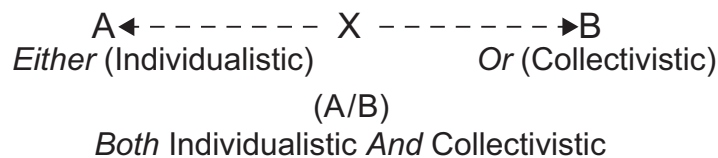


Figure 6.3 Both/and nature of continuum *Source: Author*

caffeine and alcohol, are already legally consumed so it must be absolutely arbitrary to legalize some drugs but not others. The fallacy behind this argument (Ramey, 2002) is that, although it may be impossible to find the exact dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate drug usage, it does not mean that there is no difference between drinking coffee and using LSD. Similarly, we cannot specify exactly when a man is bald or not bald, but we can tell the difference between a bald and non-bald man. Applied to intercultural communication, we avoid falling into the trap of this fallacy because we can tell the difference between cultures or between such cultural behaviors as, e.g., ‘sticking one’s neck out for nobody’ and ‘going an extra mile for people.’ The first behavior is definitely closer to the individualistic part of the continuum, while the second behavior is closer to its collectivistic part.

It must be emphasized that each of these behaviors, as new points X and Y on a continuum, contains *both* parts—A *and* B (Individualism and Collectivism) (Figure 6.3).

These two behaviors are unique only as different positions along the same continuum in the Individualism–Collectivism dichotomy of global meaning. It is more appropriate, therefore, to discuss any cultural behavior not so much in terms of ‘either/or’—either individualistic (‘sticking one’s neck out for nobody’) or collectivistic (‘going an extra mile for people’), but in terms of ‘both/and’ or ‘more/less.’ For instance, ‘sticking one’s neck out for nobody’ is more individualistic and less collectivistic, while ‘going an extra mile for people’ is more collectivistic and less individualistic. Notice that each behavior contains *both* individualistic *and* collectivistic features; the difference between them is just a matter of degree. Similarly, it is more accurate to say that, for instance, compared to each other, France is a more individualistic (and so less collectivistic) culture, while Brazil is a more collectivistic (and so less individualistic) culture.

If we want, for example, to show interactions between people from France and Brazil along the Individualism–Collectivism continuum, we need to address both these concepts. First, France must be shown as a more individualistic culture, and Brazil as a less individualistic culture. This picture still misses the other half—the Collectivism part. So, second, Brazil must be shown as a more collectivistic culture, and France as a less collectivistic culture. The complete picture of interactions between people from France and Brazil along the Individualism–Collectivism continuum must contain both these parts; think of the famous symbol for the Taoist Yin and Yang dynamic, showing two different sides as they change over to each other and share the same qualities (Figure 6.4).

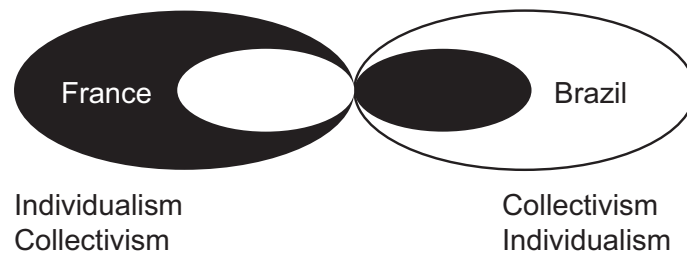


Figure 6.4 Example of Individualism–Collectivism continuum *Source: Author*

Continuum, therefore, is a topological space made up of different parts representing the same meaning; all these meanings, in other words, are related, i.e., they are, to a degree, like one another. These parts “are discernible . . . by their distance from each other or by the fact that they have different neighborhoods” (Johanson, 2001, p. 3). The concept of neighborhood, even though it comes from the field of topology, has a special ring when applied to intercultural communication. Just think about it: we tend to treat those whose meanings are closer to ours as our neighbors, and our communication with them is usually more successful.

Of course, some points may be so close that they merge in our perception. In technical terms, “the two points merge if they cannot be distinguished by their neighborhood” (Johanson, 2001, p. 4). For instance, many South and East Asian countries are sometimes treated in the West as one ‘Asian’ culture. This misperception can be an obstacle for successful communication because the cultural spaces of about 4.5 billion people are presented as a single entity (cf. Emerson, 1995). Instead, different Asian cultures must be positioned on a continuum as parts discernible by their distance from one another and from Western cultures that interact with them.

It is more difficult to treat as our neighbors those people whose meanings are further away from ours because they are unlike us. In fact, when another culture is not perceived as a neighbor, it is tempting to ignore the Other or to reduce it to our own culture. These attitudes and actions are not constructive. In Chapter 4, we discussed two such ethnocentric dangers—ethnocentric reduction (reducing the Other to our culture) and ethnographic negation (ignoring the Other altogether). We must learn to treat the Other as our neighbor no matter how far its meanings may be placed as long as they are still positioned on the same continuum. We may not always bond together, but we are still parts of the same intercultural space because we are all connected and bounded; while different, in some way we all are also like one another. Naturally, when the distance between our culture and the Other is large, intercultural communication requires a large amount of effort. After all, intercultural communication as a journey is no different from any other journey; you go from point A to point B, covering a certain

distance. The larger the distance, the more challenging the journey, yet—quite often—the more rewarding!

The Continuum Principle is important because it teaches us to go beyond binary thinking and treat intercultural communication as a more complex process. This view is more complex because it shows how people from different cultures construct a shared and continuous universe while keeping their different positions. At the beginning of the chapter, we discussed the following contradiction: on the one hand, cultural meanings are presented as unique and relative to a cultural position, and, on the other hand, common cultural meanings are presented as ensuring commensurability of intercultural communication. The Continuum Principle solves this seeming contradiction by showing that intercultural communication is a topological space where meanings exist as different positions along the same continua.

In the previous two chapters, we looked at intercultural communication from two perspectives. In Chapter 4, we presented intercultural communication in more digital terms—as a number of different and specific positions in the world. In Chapter 5, we presented intercultural communication in more analogic terms, showing how people from different cultures are all alike (commensurable). Now we know that these two views coexist because discreteness means plurality while continuity means unity. Intercultural communication, therefore, is a topological space shared by all interacting cultures, its parts discernible only by distances from one another. Not only does it remain invariant under change, but intercultural communication requires change to remain invariant. In the remaining chapters, we'll have more to say about the dynamic nature of intercultural communication.

Right now, let's define the Continuum Principle, as a whole.

4 The Continuum Principle Defined

Let's now give a more concise formulation of the Continuum Principle, based on the above discussion of its three parts.

First, intercultural communication combines two sides—the digital and the analog: the former highlights discreteness, abstraction, and efficiency, while the latter highlights resemblance, relations, and continuity.

Second, intercultural communication must be seen as a continuum—a connected and compact space. Hence, meaning in intercultural communication is viewed as a continuous succession of parts or one whole meaning.

Third, it is important to go beyond the binary vision of intercultural communication ('either/or') and treat every act of intercultural communication in terms of 'both/and' and 'more/less.'

In a nutshell, the Continuum Principle can be formulated as follows:

Intercultural communication is a process whereby people from different groups continuously construct a shared space where meanings are discernible through their distance from one another.

5 Case Study: ‘The 1999 Coca-Cola Scare in Europe’

This case study is based on the article entitled ‘Cultural variability as a challenge to global public relations: A case study of the Coca-Cola scare in Europe’ (Taylor, 2000). As usual, it is recommended that you read the article in its entirety; below, you find a summary of the article.

Be ready to identify and then discuss the following topics:

1. Intercultural communication as a shared space.
2. Reasons for different cultural responses to the crisis.
3. Continuous nature of intercultural communication.

The article discusses the so-called ‘Coca-Cola tainting crisis’ that occurred in Western Europe during the summer of 1999. This crisis was considered the worst health scare in Coke’s 113-year history and a public relations disaster.

The crisis broke out in June 1999, when school children in Belgium reported feeling ill after drinking Coca-Cola soft drinks. The Belgian government ordered that Coca-Cola immediately recall all its products in the country. The company complied but maintained that independent laboratory tests did not show any harmful substances in its products. The next day, France and Spain accused the company of selling tainted products. Coca-Cola pulled all its products from the shelves in those two countries, as well. Other European nations such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark reacted differently to the tainting scare and did not recall the Coca-Cola products. The Coca-Cola company did not accept any responsibility for the incident, suggesting that it was a case of a mass hysteria and that tainting might have been caused by other factors, such as the low-quality levels of carbon dioxide in the ‘fizz’ of the bottles made at the Coca-Cola Belgium factory. Not until nine days later did M. Douglas Ivester, CEO of the organization, acknowledge the problem and fly over to the region to deal with the crisis. On June 22, 1999, he apologized to the Belgian people in an open letter published in 15 Flemish and French papers out of Belgium.

The article documents in more detail the different responses of six West European countries involved in the scare, including the Coca-Cola communication strategy during and after the incident. Belgian, French, and Spanish consumers not only stopped drinking traditional Coke products but also stopped buying related Coca-Cola products, such as Fanta and Nestera. In France, the Dunkirk plant manufacturing Coca-Cola products was closed down. In Spain, where most of the Coca-Cola products are manufactured by Coca-Cola Espana, the Health Ministry pulled all imported bottles of Coca-Cola, regardless of place of origin. In Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, however, no actions, such as banning or boycotts, were taken against Coca-Cola. Their governments seemed to be less worried that tainting would endanger their populations.

Following the incident, the relations between the organization and its western European publics were visibly damaged. On December 7, 1999, CEO M. Douglas Ivester, who had been widely criticized for his perceived arrogance after school children in Belgium became sick, announced his resignation. He was to be replaced by Douglas Draft, an Australian with an extensive intercultural expertise. A new ‘Coke’s Back’ advertising campaign was carried out in the region. Coca-Cola began to implement a new marketing strategy, trying to better understand cultural differences around the world. The company learned that the ‘one market, one strategy’ approach did not work. On January 29, 2000, Coca-Cola issued a news release, describing its new realignment strategy. Among other things, it said: ‘Our success depends on our ability to make billions of individual connections each day in every community around the world.’

Now let’s see how this case study can be an illustration of the Continuum Principle of intercultural communication.

1. Intercultural communication as a shared space.

The interactions between Coca-Cola and a number of European cultures are definitely an example of a continuum. There would be no interaction between them if they were not connected. Here, these continua can be represented by such global cultural dimensions as Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance. Intercultural communication between Coca-Cola and the six European cultures can be seen as a shared space formed by (at least) two continua—High-Power Distance/Low Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance/Uncertainty Acceptance. These dimensions apply to all interacting cultures, e.g., American Coca-Cola and Belgium. In other words, intercultural communication must be viewed as a process of constructing a shared space.

This process, as described in the article, was not successful in some cases, and more successful in others. Why was that? Why did the West European cultures react to the crisis differently?

2. Reasons for different cultural responses to the crisis.

Now that we have identified the global cultural dimensions forming a continuum, we can take a closer look at the positions that different cultures occupy along this continuum. Not surprisingly, the countries that showed a lower tolerance for the crisis (Belgium, France, and Spain) have higher scores on both the Uncertainty Avoidance index and the Power Distance index. According to Hofstede’s research, the Uncertainty Avoidance scores are as follows: United States 46, France/Spain 86, Belgium

94. The Power Distance scores are as follows: United States 40, Spain 57, Belgium 65, France 68. These scores explain why those three countries were so displeased with Coca-Cola. On the one hand, those countries have a low tolerance for uncertainty, e.g., they dislike the entry of any global product into their cultures. It might be said that the Coca-Cola company was condemned not so much for the tainting situation, as such, but was criticized because the company remained silent for over a week after the first illnesses. Also, those countries were not happy with Coca-Cola's response to the crisis because Coca-Cola's claims that its products were safe challenged their authority. Besides, no formal apologies were made to the French public, ignoring a large distance between the low-power United States (40) and high-power France (68).

The scores of the three Scandinavian nations were more similar to those of the United States on the two continua described above. According to Hofstede's research, the Uncertainty Avoidance scores are as follows: United States 46, Denmark 23, Sweden 29, and Norway 50. The Power Distance scores are as follows: United States 40, Denmark 18, Sweden 31, and Norway 31. Hence, more successful communication between Coca-Cola and these cultures may be attributed to their similar attitudes toward risk and authority.

3. Continuous nature of intercultural communication.

In this case, communication can continue only because of the distances between Coca-Cola and the European cultures, described in the article. In fact, the article captures their interactions as they took place during the summer of 1999, trying to stop the (analogic) flow of communication and present it as a snapshot.

Coca-Cola, of course, failed to perceive the distances between the countries and draw the distinctions in various continua that formed the intercultural space. As a result, the company had to drop its 'one market, one strategy' approach and vowed to pay more attention to cultural differences in order to connect with various communities around the world. To its credit, Coca-Cola chose to expand intercultural horizons. In order to maintain its continuity as one of the leading American companies, Coca-Cola had to change. Appointing a new CEO with extensive intercultural expertise was one of the first steps in that direction.

6 Side Trips

6.1 *Cultural Dimensions and Investment Decisions*

In their article entitled 'The relationship between psychic distance and foreign direct investment decisions: A Korean study,' Jai-Beom Kim and Dong-kee Rhee (2001) argue that the greater the distance between the home and

the host cultures, the greater the probability companies will choose a joint venture over acquisitions.

** Do you agree with this argument? What cultural dimensions do you think might affect such business decisions? What culture, and in what form, would you choose to do business with?

6.2 *Gender and Our Brains*

Interviewed by *TIME* (Kluger, 2019), the British cognitive researcher Gina Rippon talks about why male and female brains aren't so different, explored in her book *Gender and our brains*. She also mentions that she's been contacted by transgender males or females who ask, "Can you put me in a scanner and prove my brain is male or female?" Her reply is, "I'm sorry, there isn't any such thing. I can't say your brain is all pinks or blues. In fact, I wanted to call my book *Fifty Shades of Gray Matter*."

** How does this pertain to the continuum concept? How can such findings affect human interaction?

6.3 *Intercultural Communication on Web Sites*

Given that the Internet is a largely low-context medium, Elizabeth Würtz in her research of intercultural communication on Web sites (2006) explores how people from high-context cultures might make the most of the potentials offered by the Internet generation of today. Using the high- and low-context dimension framework and analyzing McDonald's Web sites, she identifies five strategies by which visual communication is used to support high-context communication traits.

** Can you think what such strategies may be?

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