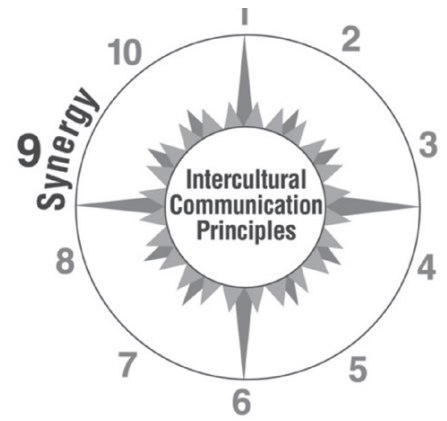


# 9 Synergy Principle

' $2+2=5$  (or More!).'



**Key Theme:** Integration

**Problem Question:** What is the best strategy in intercultural communication?

**Objective:** To help you understand the nature and importance of intercultural integration

**Key Concepts:** Complexity, conceptualization, discrimination, evaluation, 'flow states,' feedback, fundamental attribution error, generalization, hierarchy, interaction, interdependence, morphogenesis, non-normative stereotype, non-summativity, normative stereotype, prejudice, Pareto optimality, stereotype, synergy

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## 1 Introducing the Problem Question

In the previous chapter, we looked at intercultural communication as transaction and saw that it takes place in a negotiation zone. Based upon how this zone is viewed, a number of approaches to intercultural transaction are possible. We noted that only with the integration approach can people realize their full potential for mutual benefit. Even when no negotiation zone seems to exist, it can be created; it is as if people know some secret, making a negotiation zone appear seemingly from nowhere and finding the best resolution to their tensions.

In this chapter, thus, we take up the following Problem Question: ‘What is the best strategy in intercultural communication?’

## 2 Perception: ‘Seizing the World’

As noted earlier, perception is a crucial part of communication. When we perceive reality, we try to conceptualize and evaluate our experiences. For instance, if we come across a large elevation of the earth’s surface with steep sides and then another large elevation of the earth’s surface with steep sides, we may conceptualize this part of reality as ‘a mountain.’ **Conceptualization**, then, is a process of generalization or typifying. Also, we evaluate our experiences; in our judgment, for instance, mountains may be seen as sites of revelation and inspiration, as construction sites, as challenge challenges, etc. **Evaluation**, then, is a process of appraising or judging our typifications.

During intercultural communication, we also conceptualize and evaluate our experiences. If you plan to go to Spain, for instance, and in one of the travel guides you see a picture of bullfighting, you may decide that all Spaniards enjoy watching bullfighting, putting them into the general type ‘Spaniards enjoy bullfighting.’ Or, if you happen to see an awkward person from the United States trying to dribble a soccer ball, you may make the following judgment: ‘Soccer in the United States is a joke.’ However, it so happens that your perception in these two cases is flawed; your conceptualization is oversimplified, and your appraisal is too biased. It is as if perception played two tricks on you, called ‘stereotype’ and ‘prejudice.’

### 2.1 *Stereotype: Are All Swans White?*

The term ‘stereotype’ was introduced in 1824 to describe a printing duplication process “in which the original is preserved and in which there is no opportunity for change or deviation in the reduplications” (Rudmin, 1989, p. 8). The meaning of the term has somewhat changed, but the basic idea remains the same: you take an original conception, just like a metal printing plate, and start using it in different situations, expecting the original conception to be preserved. In other words, you expect the original meaning to be the same in every situation of its use. A **stereotype**, therefore, is a fixed perception of people from



Figure 9.1 Stereotype of Americans Source: 2010, POKKETMOWSE

another culture. Through such fixed perception, we come to view each and every individual from that culture in the same or similar way (Figure 9.1).

Two kinds of stereotypes are usually isolated—normative and non-normative (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). **Normative stereotypes** are overgeneralizations based on some limited information, such as travel guides, mentioned above. For example, the normative stereotype of Muslims, based on media news accounts, involves bombings, violence, and terrorism. When a group of Muslims on a holy pilgrimage wandered through Harrington in Washington State, U.S., leaving a trail of goodwill and friendliness (Clark, 1995), it was quite surprising for the people of that small town for it went against their expectations. **Non-normative stereotypes** are overgeneralizations that are purely self-projective; we project concepts of our own culture onto people of another culture. For example, Italians might think that French also love pasta. Regardless of their origin, however, every stereotype is a firm conception (‘stereo’ means ‘solid’ or ‘firm’) used over and over again with the assumption that it reflects the same reality, i.e., has the same meaning whenever you use it.

Communication is successful when our conceptualization accurately reflects reality, recognized and enjoined by others in the same speech community; if we use the word ‘mountain’ each time we come across a large elevation of the earth’s surface with steep sides, our communication is likely to be successful. If, all of a sudden, we call a large elevation of the earth’s surface with steep sides ‘a tree,’ communication is likely to break down. Similarly, conceptualization of our experiences of dealing with people from another culture should also accurately reflect its reality.

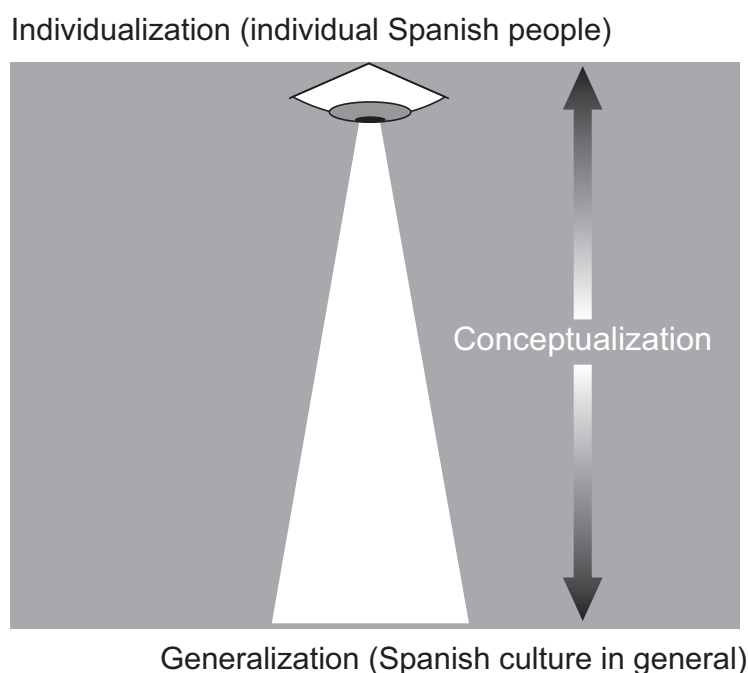


Figure 9.2 Conceptualization as dynamic process Source: Author

*Generalization vs Stereotyping.* We can look at the process of conceptualization as a cultural gaze discussed in Chapter 4—a projection beam aimed at our experiences and reflecting everything it observes in the form of general types.

Conceptualization as a dynamic process takes place between individualization (individual cases) and generalization (Figure 9.2).

When we approach people from another culture, we resort to **generalization**, putting our experiences in general categories or types. A number of general conceptualizations of Spaniards in relation to bullfighting can be created on the basis of the travel guides mentioned earlier. For example, we may decide that few (e.g., 10%), some (e.g., 20%), many (e.g., 40%), most (e.g., 80%), or all (100%) Spaniards support bullfighting (Figure 9.3).

In each case, our conceptualization covers more and more ground, reflecting more and more of that reality of Spanish culture. The more ground covered and reflected, the more conceptualization functions as generalization; as a result, we can rely on such general types and carry out our interactions more effectively. However, for our communication with Spaniards to be as effective as possible, we must make sure our conceptualization is as accurate as possible. For instance, according to recent polls, only a small percentage of Spaniards support bullfighting (Calvo, 2016) and during the bullfighting season of 2014–2015, only 9.5% of Spaniards bought a ticket to a bull-related festival or show (Nayler, 2017). So, our general conceptualization of Spaniards in relation to bullfighting may take the following form: ‘Few Spaniards like bullfighting.’ As a result, we will perhaps be more careful bringing up bullfighting as a topic each time we want to strike up a conversation and build relationships with a Spaniard. The more often we bring up bullfighting in our interactions with Spaniards, expecting them to respond positively

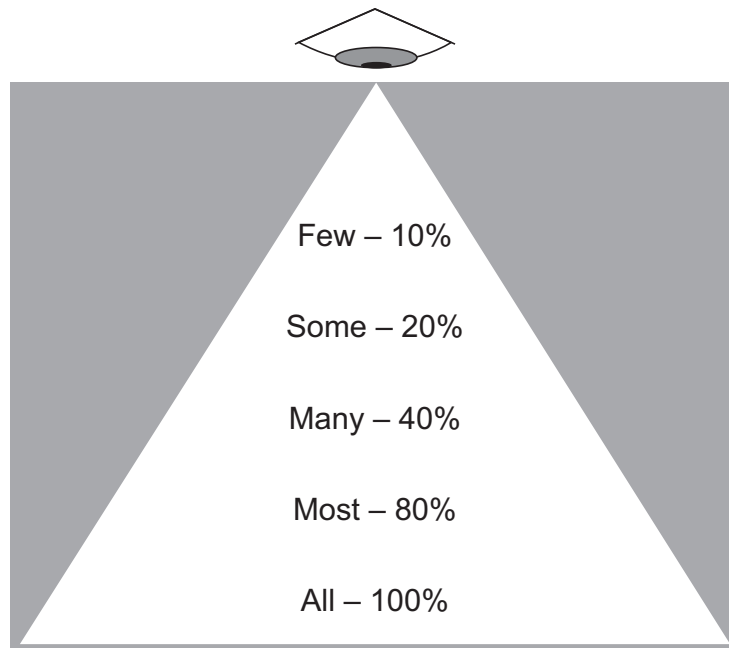


Figure 9.3 Example of generalization Source: Author

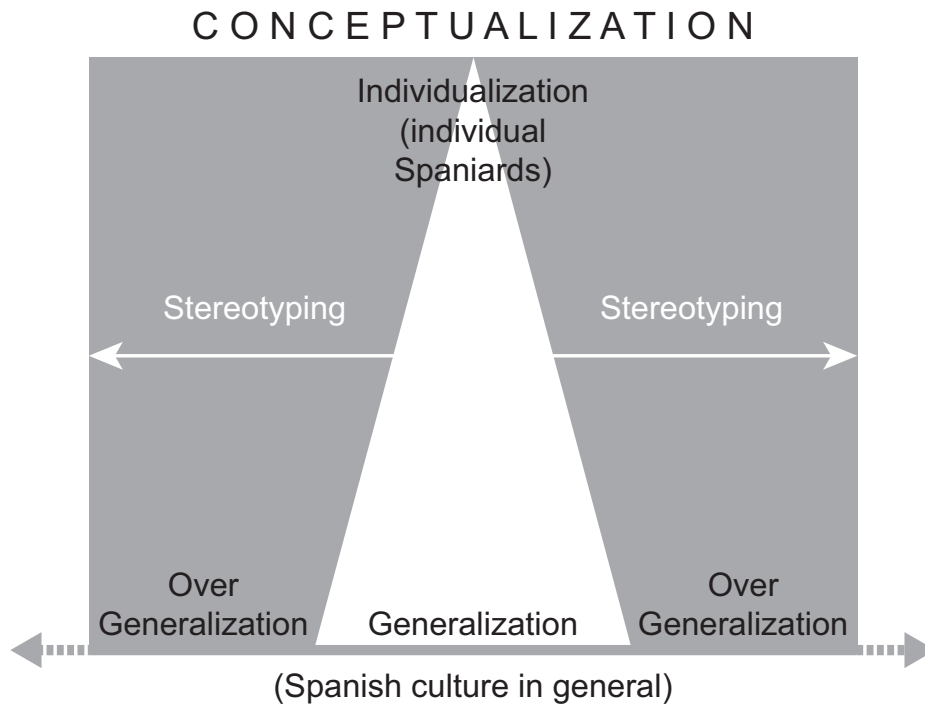


Figure 9.4 Relationship between generalization and stereotyping Source: Author

to this topic, the more individual cases (Spanish people) who have different opinions of bullfighting are likely to remain outside our conceptualization; as a result, our conceptualization of Spaniards becomes less general and more stereotypical, and therefore less reliable.

So, the more accurate observations of individual cases we are able to make, the more conceptualization exists as generalization and less as stereotyping, and vice versa (Figure 9.4).

The more stereotypical our perception of the Spanish culture, the less effective our interactions with Spaniards. For example, if we believe that all (100%) Spaniards support bullfighting, while in fact only few (10%) do, our stereotyping is very significant (90% individual cases left out). If we believe that most (80%) Spaniards like bullfighting, while in fact only some (20%) do, our stereotyping is still quite significant (60%) (Figure 9.5). And so on.

Stereotyping can be seen as a difference between overgeneralization and generalization, e.g.,  $100\% - 20\% = 80\%$  stereotype. Naturally, the smaller this difference, the more reliable our conceptualization and the more successful our intercultural communication, and vice versa. For instance, if we spend more time in Spain, we may meet more and more individuals there who refuse to talk about bullfighting. Our conceptualization then may take the following form: 'Most Spaniards don't support bullfighting.' As a result, our conceptualization moves further away from such overgeneralizations (stereotypes) as 'All Spaniards support bullfighting' or 'Most Spaniards support bullfighting.' Our conceptualization will then function more in the form of generalization (typifying), leaving less room for overgeneralization (stereotyping). Ideally, of course, everyone should be approached as an individual. As was noted in Chapter 1, ideally, we should approach everyone as an individual and call them only by their individual names; however, that is not realistic as it would require for every person to get to know everyone single person in every situation of interaction. Similarly, since we cannot know where every person from every culture stands on every issue, we cannot not stereotype.

Karl Popper gave the example of Europeans who for thousands of years had only ever seen millions of white swans (see Popper, 1959). Naturally, their conceptualization was as follows: 'swans are white.' However, exploration of

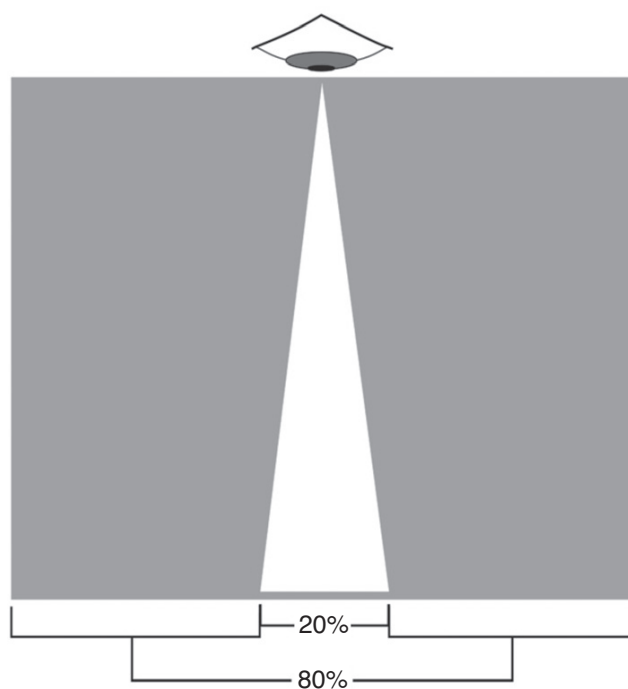


Figure 9.5 Example of relationship between generalization and stereotyping Source: Author

Australasia introduced Europeans to black swans. As discussed in Chapter 2, we can never be certain that we possess all the knowledge, in this case—the one and only generalization. Only one black swan was needed to change the conceptualization that all swans are white (Figure 9.6).



Figure 9.6 Open-ended nature of conceptualization Source: *Wikimedia Creative Commons*

The best we can do is to make sure our generalizations are as accurate as possible, avoiding overgeneralizations—especially those beginning with ‘All.’ We must be sure to speak of white swans when the swans we observe are really white. If we begin to see more and more black swans, but still claim to know that all swans are white, our cultural gaze becomes more stereotypical and our interaction less reliable. In a manner of speaking, the more ground covered by the dark forces of stereotyping, the less ground left for generalization; and, conversely, the more ground covered by the light forces of generalization, the less ground left for stereotyping. It is as if a struggle between the light and the dark forces takes place, and the more we assume that all swans are white, while in fact we know more and more swans are black, the more the forces of darkness win. The dark forces of stereotyping, like swans, spread out their wings, as it were, chasing out the light forces of generalization (Figure 9.7).

Intercultural communication, therefore, is successful when our reflections of other cultures are accurate and function as generalization (typifying). However, we should be ready to make changes in our conceptualization when new experiences do not fit into our original general types. Our intercultural experiences are more complex than any generalization, let alone overgeneralization.

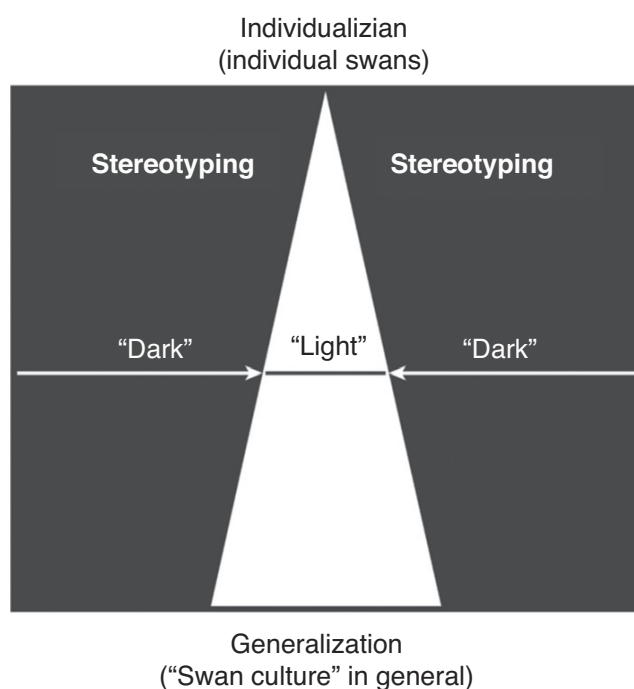


Figure 9.7 Relationship between individualization and generalization *Source: Author*

So, if, for example, you plan to travel to Italy and someone tells you Italians are fond of opera, do your homework and try to find out as much as you can about this conceptualization. Also, be ready to change your conceptualization, if necessary, as you interact with more and more Italians. You may find out, for instance, that the nation’s opera-house ticket sales have been dropping for years (Mescio, 2014) and that, in 2018, 88.3% of Italians did not see any opera or classical music concert (Jadda, 2019). Then, bringing up opera as a conversation opener may not be a very good idea. Remember: not all swans are white.

## 2.2 *Prejudice: The United States and ‘the Rest-of-the-World Soccer Cup’*

The term ‘prejudice’ is derived from Latin ‘*praejudicium*,’ where ‘*prae*’ means ‘before’ and ‘*judicium*’ means ‘judgment.’ Hence, **prejudice** is a judgment made beforehand or without examination of the facts, i.e., a quite emotional and not very rational judgment. Prejudice is a prejudgment (premature judgment), based on little or no interaction with people from another culture. Prejudice can be positive or negative, but it usually carries a negative bias toward people from another culture.

Ultimately, prejudice is developed when people feel insecure about their own identity. It seems that others claim the resources that make up your cultural identity, undermining your culture’s vitality. While “prejudice, at its



pathological extreme, is one of the most terrible manifestations of human nature” (Cullingford, 2000, p. 8), people develop prejudices through ignorance, fear, apprehension, etc. Such feelings can be understood; after all, intercultural communication takes place against the background of uncertainty.

Suppose you come from a culture such as Brazil where soccer is idolized and everyone plays very well. One day, you come across a person from the United States clumsily dribbling a soccer ball. The next day, you come across this in a magazine: *There are just two things about the World Cup that prevent Americans from caring: It involves soccer and the rest of the world* (Stein, 2002). Based on these experiences (and your own passion for soccer), you may decide that soccer in the United States is a joke and use statements to that effect in conversations with your friends and people from the United States.

However, as you interact more with people from the United States, you discover that your negative attitude overlooks a number of important facts. For example, the U.S. Soccer Federation, one of the world’s first organizations to be affiliated with FIFA, soccer’s world governing body, celebrated its 100-year anniversary in 2013. According to the 2019 FIFA ranking, the U.S. women’s team is ranked number one in the world. As for that magazine article mentioned earlier, it happens to be an example of self-satire. It seems that your original (negative) prejudgment (‘Soccer in the United States is a joke’) can hardly be considered accurate and will not help your intercultural interactions. So, why not correct your appraisal? Well, it is easier said than done. Prejudice is widespread and enduring because people are quite creative when it comes to protecting their cultural identity at the expense of others—and ultimately at their own expense. People resort to a special form of reasoning called the **fundamental attribution error** (Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Heider, 1958). Let’s look at this error and see why it is also called ‘correspondence bias.’

When we interact with other people, we attribute their actions to disposition or situation. Disposition is what we are, like a personality; for example, we may think of ourselves as smart, outgoing, etc. Applied to culture, disposition is our collective identity—our cultural personality. And situation, of course, is various circumstances, i.e., what may happen to any of us. If someone, as in our example above, sees an awkward American dribbling a soccer ball and decides that Americans are not good at soccer, they attribute this characteristic (‘not good at soccer’) to the person’s cultural disposition; they reason that the person is not good at soccer because that person is from the United States. But, what if you see another American dribbling a ball like a professional soccer player? How do you explain that? Then, you attribute this characteristic (‘excellent soccer player’) to some situation; for example, you may think that the person must have spent some time in Brazil (your country!) where that person learned to play so well (you make it sound almost as if you should take credit for their success). In other words, you take this person to be an exception and so you do not change your original appraisal: soccer in the United States is still ‘a joke.’

In our perception of people from another culture, we tend to make the fundamental attribution error, which is a tendency to overestimate the negative influence of dispositional factors and underestimate the positive influence of situational factors in explaining others' behavior. Needless to say, we perceive people from our own culture in exactly the opposite way: we justify our negative behaviors by situational factors (underestimate them) and present positive behaviors as part of our cultural disposition (overestimate them).

Prejudice serves two important functions—value-expressive and ego-defensive (Brislin, 1993). The value-expressive function helps to promote people's perception of their own culture—to blow their own horn, so to speak. This becomes necessary when people from one culture do something better than people from other cultures; for example, people in Brazil may express the value of the way they play soccer (better than most). The value-expressive function is similar to emphasizing a positive cultural disposition. The ego-defensive function helps to protect people's perception of their own culture—to downplay their failures, so to speak. This becomes necessary when people from one culture do not fare well compared to people from other cultures; for example, if a soccer team from Brazil were to lose to a U.S. team, they may defend their defeat by pointing out that many players on their team were tired or sick. The ego-defensive function is similar to emphasizing a negative situational factor. The value-expressive function and ego-defensive function are two sides of the same coin, and this coin is the fundamental attribution error.

People are quite creative (consciously or unconsciously) in expressing a positive view of their own culture and a negative view of another culture. For example, Teun van Dijk (1991) lists the following strategies of expressing prejudice: (1) apparent denials ('I have nothing against Blacks, Turks, Jews, but . . .'); (2) apparent admissions ('Of course there are also smart Blacks, Turks, Jews, but . . .'); (3) transfer ('I don't mind so much, but my neighbor, colleagues . . .'); and (4) contrast ('We always had to work a lot, but they . . .'). Notice how Self always looks good ('We have to work hard'), while blame is shifted to Other (there is a 'but' in every statement). We typically want to perceive our own culture in a positive light, and the fundamental attribution error allows us to do it by manipulating dispositional and situational factors—always in our favor.

The fundamental attribution error, however, is still an error of perception, and it is fundamental. It prevents us from seeing ourselves the way we really are and people different from us the way they really are, e.g., a U.S. soccer team as stronger than our own team. We can continue, of course, to think and say that 'Soccer in the United States is a joke,' but it will not help us interact successfully. By holding a prejudice against soccer in the United States, we in fact refuse to recognize its positive aspects and admit our own weaknesses. As a result, we fail to replace a weak link in our own culture, e.g., by making some changes in the way we play soccer. Prejudice, therefore, is not only detrimental toward another culture, it is also self-detrimental.

If you are convinced that soccer in your culture is superior, there is only one way to find out if that is really the case—to play against teams from other cultures. If your team will keep winning, you can reasonably argue that soccer in your culture is, indeed, superior, and other cultures can learn from yours. There is a difference between a firm (inflexible) prejudice and a firm (strong) conviction. Those who hold prejudice are usually reluctant to discuss their attitudes, e.g., stubbornly or blindly insisting that their soccer team is the best one (even though their team keeps losing), while soccer in the United States is a joke. Those who hold convictions are open to interaction and willing or even eager to test out their conviction, e.g., by playing a soccer match. If people from another culture think and say that the way soccer is played in your culture is ‘a joke’ and you are convinced that this is not true, you should provide facts to help them change their judgment. After all, prejudice is a premature judgment, and your task is to help those people judge soccer in your culture the way it really is after they have all the facts at their disposal. Then, their attitude toward your culture (as far as soccer is concerned) should change and become more accurate. As a result, all of you will be able to enjoy more competitive and rewarding soccer matches.

### 3 Escaping Suspicion and Fear

Stereotype and prejudice have one important thing in common: they are based on the assumption that cultures are static objects, like mountains, and that, once our cultural self-concept along with the conception and appraisal of people from another culture are created, they change only at our will and always in our favor. We do not want to change and make adjustments to another culture if it goes against our original conceptualizations and appraisals. However, sometimes we make adjustments even to seemingly static objects. You may have seen the movie *The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill But Came Down a Mountain* where a group of British cartographers and the townsfolk of a small Welsh town could not agree whether a large elevation of the earth’s surface with steep sides should be called (categorized) a ‘mountain’ (must be at least 1,000 feet tall by the British government regulations) or a ‘hill.’ The movie tells a sweet fable, but also makes a serious point: how can we be certain where a hill ends and a mountain begins? In this light, our perception changes even when we deal with static objects; for instance, we may start calling a large elevation of the earth’s surface ‘a mountain’ instead of ‘a hill.’

People, of course, are nothing like static objects; they interact with one another, and it is impossible to pin them down in fixed general types and appraisals. The word ‘perception’ is derived from Latin ‘percipere’—‘to seize wholly,’ ‘to see all the way through.’ It is only natural that we want to see ourselves and other people ‘all the way through’—seizing the whole world, as it were. In other words, we want to set our mind once and for all, with the assumption that we can rely on such conceptualizations and appraisals in every intercultural encounter. This way, we create categories and start

using those general types as if they were metal plates, expecting them to be reliable in all situations; when we fail to notice that they no longer work because they are too general, we become victims of stereotypes. For instance, as said earlier, if most Spaniards change the subject as soon as they hear the word ‘bullfighting,’ but we still continue to open conversations with bullfighting, then we become victims of our stereotype. We fail to notice that our conceptualization is oversimplified and leaves out many individual cases, i.e., those Spanish people who have a different opinion about bullfighting. Similarly, we make quick judgments about other people and stick to them no matter what; for example, if our (Brazilian) soccer team loses to another (U.S.) team, we justify it by situational factors. We do not think (or do not want to think) that a change has taken place, e.g., that our team is perhaps not as strong as it once was, and the team that beat us is now stronger than before. If we continue to stick to our judgment that we are better at soccer and our loss is just an accident, we become victims of prejudice. In extreme cases, overgeneralization (stereotype) and negative appraisal (prejudice) may lead to **discrimination**, i.e., biased action when people from another culture are treated disadvantageously.

In a way, stereotype and prejudice are ‘imperialistic’ by nature. We want to seize the whole world and put it in the system of our meanings, resisting change or allowing only positive change in ourselves, and denying change or allowing only negative change in the Other. For example, many U.S. colleges have been using American Indian icons as their mascots, leading to tensions on and off campus. Many examples of such tensions are described in the book *The Native American mascots controversy* (Springwood & King, 2001a). The authors of the book quote environmental historian Richard White who suggests that “White Americans are pious toward Indian peoples, but we don’t take them seriously; *we don’t credit them with the capacity to make changes*” (Springwood & King, 2001b; emphasis added). In other words, white Americans fail to accept the fact that American Indians cannot be put, for example, into the (familiar and convenient to white Americans) stereotype of ‘wild and pristine savages’ and judged accordingly because they are now a very different and complicated culture.

Both stereotype and prejudice, therefore, ignore reality that consists in our complex interactions with other people. People are tricked into thinking that their conceptualizations and appraisals of people from other cultures are accurate and reliable when, in fact, they are not. Stereotype and prejudice go against reality: black swans are called white, and a strong soccer team is considered a joke. It is as if people have blinds on, preventing them from seeing the real Other and the real Self. In a word, stereotype and prejudice are not the best ways to deal with intercultural reality: the image that we get is distorted, and it fails us in our interactions. It is as if a wall exists between people, preventing them from developing reliable conceptualizations and appraisals of one another.

But, who is to decide what generalizations are accurate and what judgments are valid? The answer is obvious: such decisions can only be made by

people from interacting cultures *together*. Only by acting together is it possible for people to create accurate categories and reasonable judgments of one another. Then, we can break the wall created by uncertainty, insecurity, fear, apprehension, and ignorance.

The key to reaching the optimal outcome in intercultural communication is for people to work not against, but with, one another. During this process, people from one culture may find out that their positions and interests differ from other cultures'. However, clearly stating one's positions and defending one's convictions, based on accurate categorization and judicious reasoning, is not the same as stubbornly sticking to one's stereotypes and prejudices, refusing to change and failing to accept changes in people from other cultures. In every intercultural encounter, conceptualizations and appraisals still differ, creating tensions; however, managing intercultural tensions becomes more rational with a higher chance of success.

Thus, there is a difference between overgeneralization (stereotyping) and generalization (typifying); everyone should be willing and able to explain why they think that Spaniards like bullfighting, changing their original conceptions if necessary. By the same token, there is a difference between prejudices and convictions; all people should be willing and able to defend their arguments, e.g., why one soccer team is better, changing their judgment if necessary. Categorization and holding convictions are crucial for successful intercultural communication because differences can be voiced and settled peacefully. People can create their categorizations and appraisals of one another only through intercultural communication, i.e., together.

## 4 Introducing the Synergy Principle

Let's now formulate, based on the discussion above, the ninth principle of intercultural communication—the Synergy Principle. We will isolate three parts that make up this principle. Each dealing with intercultural communication as a synergistic process. First, we will discuss intercultural communication in terms of flow dynamics; then, we will look at intercultural synergy as non-summativity; finally, we will present intercultural communication as a search toward Pareto optimality. We will discuss each part separately and then formulate the Synergy Principle, as a whole.

### 4.1 Intercultural Synergy and Non-Summativity

Unlike 'energy,' which refers to forces of isolated objects, **synergy** refers to a process where people work together by integrating their forces (or energies). The word 'synergy' is derived from the Greek word 'synergos,' which means 'working together' ('syn'—'together', and 'ergon'—'work'). Synergistic effects are produced by two or more cooperating individuals, i.e., those operating together. The role of synergy is crucial in the emergence and evolution of complex living systems (e.g., Corning, 2014). Culture is one such

example, defined as a cultivated system of symbolic resources and practices shared by a group of people.

Systems thinking was most fully developed in the 20th century by Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy—an Austrian-born biologist and one of the founders of General Systems Theory, which argues that the world is best understood in terms of systems whose properties cannot be reduced to the properties of their components (Bertalanffy, 1956; Boulding, 1956). Whereas for classical science one event in the world (‘cause’) determines the other event (‘effect’) in a linear fashion, systems thinking goes beyond simple causality and views the world in terms of relationships among interacting parts. In this sense, it “is in direct contrast to classic views of linear cause and effect” (Caetano, 2007, p. 104).

The ideas of General Systems Theory have been widely used in the study of communication, most extensively applied to situations of interpersonal and organizational communication (e.g., Ruben & Kim, 1975; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Many studies of intercultural communication also draw on these ideas by focusing on the process of interaction between cooperating people from different groups (Bennett, 2013). For instance, Spitzberg’s model of intercultural communication competence and Kim’s cross-cultural adaptation model are two studies representative of the systems orientation (see Wiseman, 2003).

All such studies rest on the same general premises grounded in systems thinking.

First of all, the premise of **interaction** emphasizes the dynamic nature of intercultural communication, in which meaning can be understood only within complex relationships among various groups. In this light, intercultural communication comes into being as a result of continuous interactions between people from different cultures.

Second, the premise of **interdependence** emphasizes the codetermined outcome of every interaction. Every communicative act impacts the system as a whole, i.e., if there is a change in one part of a system, the entire system changes, as well. In this light, just like, to use the famous lines from John Donne’s Meditation XVII, ‘No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main,’ we can say that ‘no culture is an island entire of itself’ but is a part of a world where intercultural communication ‘tolls for thee.’

Third, the premise of **feedback** emphasizes the role of information that is put back into a system in order to regulate its further output. Just as in any interaction, in intercultural communication “corrective or negative feedback serves to keep the system on course, and growth or positive feedback serves to transform or change a system” (Schmidt et al., 2007, p. 51). In this light, intercultural communication can be viewed as a continuous adjustment process between one culture and other cultures as its ‘environment.’

Fourth, and most importantly, the premise of holism emphasizes **non-summativity**—the idea that the system is more than the sum of its parts.

The idea of non-summativity goes all the way back to Aristotle who wrote about “a plurality of parts” that “are not merely a complete aggregate but instead some kind of a whole beyond its parts” (*Metaphysics* 8.6, 1045a; see also Hanson, 1995). The difference between adding and integrating forces into a new whole is often illustrated with an example of making a cake. If we add together flour, eggs, olive oil, salt, etc. and put it all in a bowl, we get exactly that—flour, eggs, olive oil, salt, etc. However, if we mix them all together, integrating all these ingredients and baking them, we get a cake—a new entity with its unique taste that is different from the taste of each individual ingredient. In this light, “the cake is a system; the sum of its ingredients is not” (Nicotera, 2020, p. 26). In this light, if we add something and something else, e.g., 2 and 2, we get their sum:  $2 + 2 = 4$ . If, however, we integrate something with something else, we get a new entity that does not equal the sum of its parts; it is qualitatively different. In a manner of speaking, 2 plus 2 does not add up to 4; rather, it can be 5 (or more!).

The premise of holism, of course, applies not only to making a cake: it is found in any situation where two or more parts interact and form one whole. In other words, “when ordinary people using available resources are allowed to freely exchange opinions and argue points of view, extraordinary results can occur” (Schmidt et al., 2007, p. 49). The importance of intercultural integration becomes particularly important in large-scale enterprises that affect all cultures such as dealing with global crises and especially climate change. However, intercultural communication on any scale—from mixed-religion families to ethnically diverse workplaces to international joint business ventures—can be successful only due to “cultural synergy . . . as the positive result of intercultural interaction” (Barmeyer & Davoine, 2019, p. 8). Only by cooperating and working together on a certain task can people from different cultures integrate their resources and interests, striving toward the optimal outcome of their interactions that cannot be achieved by any one culture individually.

#### **4.2 Toward Pareto Optimality**

As discussed in the previous chapter, people can take several routes in managing their tensions and looking for a resolution to conflict. To examine these routes more closely, let's take a concrete example of Alleo—an international railway company that is a joint subsidiary of the French state railway SNCF and the German DB (see Barmeyer & Davoine, 2019).

The first route is avoidance, where people choose not to address any real or potential tensions. As a result, people fail to take an opportunity integrating their separate resources for mutual benefit. In this case, neither one nor another culture really wins; this ‘neither-nor’ approach is a ‘lose-lose’ situation. In the Alleo situation, this could theoretically take the form of each side trying to design and implement rail connections between France

and Germany. However, this situation involves trans-border services calling for various interfaces in infrastructure, security, and climate protection. Hence, the situation is a contested terrain, where conflicts and negotiations between different actors with divergent norms and expectations cannot be really avoided.

The second route is polarization; due to power inequality, this ‘either-or’ approach to is a ‘win-lose’ situation, when one culture is dominated by another. In extreme cases, one culture may view the Other as an adversary and so the zone of potential agreement turns into a war zone. In the case of Alleo, one of the ways of solving operational problems in the daily cross-border traffic was through what Barmeyer and Davoine call ‘compromise by one group.’ For instance, the German side complained of having four to five different contact people on the French side, covering all regions; besides, most of those employees could not speak German. As a result, the German model of regional traffic management centers was adopted, and German-speaking French colleagues were appointed to manage customers, trains, and local issues. Barmeyer and Davoine note that this route is not strictly speaking a compromise as the simple result of a power asymmetry; rather, it is the adoption of a best practice by one group through the negotiation and discussion process (Barmeyer & Davoine, 2019). Were there no negotiation and discussion, it would be a clear case of polarization, one culture dominating the other.

The third route is compromise. In the Arabic language, for example, ‘compromise’ is translated as two words, literally meaning ‘halfway solution’ (Heggy, 2002), which is a good way to describe this route of managing intercultural tensions. It is a halfway solution because people from both cultures seem to win, yet neither culture completely reaches its goal; this ‘both-neither’ approach is a ‘no lose-no win’ situation. Compromise should not be perceived as a negative approach to conflict, associated with defeat, weakness, and capitulation. Compromise creates a space for further communication and strengthens the seeds that will continue to grow toward integration. In the Alleo situation, this ‘meeting in the middle’ route took the form of compromising on the duration and structure of meetings, or the on-board catering menu.

The fourth route is integration—the ‘both-and’ approach and a ‘win-win’ situation when full potential of all interacting cultures is realized through various synergistic practices. With its motto—‘The best of both cultures’—the objective of Alleo is to combine French and German strengths, i.e., to produce and support synergy. As a result of such intercultural synergy, innovative products and services emerge, such as the new reservation system and the new high-speed trains’ on-board service where the German and the French attendants stay together during the whole trip, offering a bilingual (or trilingual) joint service to the passengers.

Thus, in intercultural communication people should: (1) move from the ‘neither-nor’ approach of avoidance; (2) avoid the trap of the ‘either-or’



approach of polarization; (3) build on the ‘both-neither’ approach of compromise; and (4) strive toward the ‘both-and’ approach of integration. People should strive toward this limit by using all their energies together and reaching the optimal outcome.

The term used to denote this limit of creative options for achieving such an outcome is known as ‘Pareto optimality’ (Lax & Sebenius, 1991). While “in economics, Pareto Optimality refers to the state where no one is worse-off in one state than another but someone is better-off” (Huang, 2002, p. 70), in simple terms, Pareto optimality is a solution that cannot be improved upon without making one of the sides worse off. In such a case, after creating and trying all options, people agree on a joint outcome that satisfies all sides and that cannot be improved upon any further without making one of the sides worse. It is easy to see that of the four routes discussed earlier, the approach linked to Pareto optimality is that of integration; here, a decision is made jointly and satisfies people from all cultures.

Pareto optimality is not a real point that can be reached; rather, it is an ideal toward which people strive. That is why Pareto optimality is often called the “the Pareto frontier” (Sebenius, 2002, p. 237). In Figure 9.8, Pareto frontier is shown on the dual concern model along with the locations of the four approaches to managing intercultural interactions, discussed earlier.

Overall, truly successful intercultural communication as a synergistic process is directed toward Pareto optimality—the frontier that is never really reached but is always out there. It is an idea, an ideal. The more synergistic intercultural communication is, the closer people from different cultures come to this frontier.

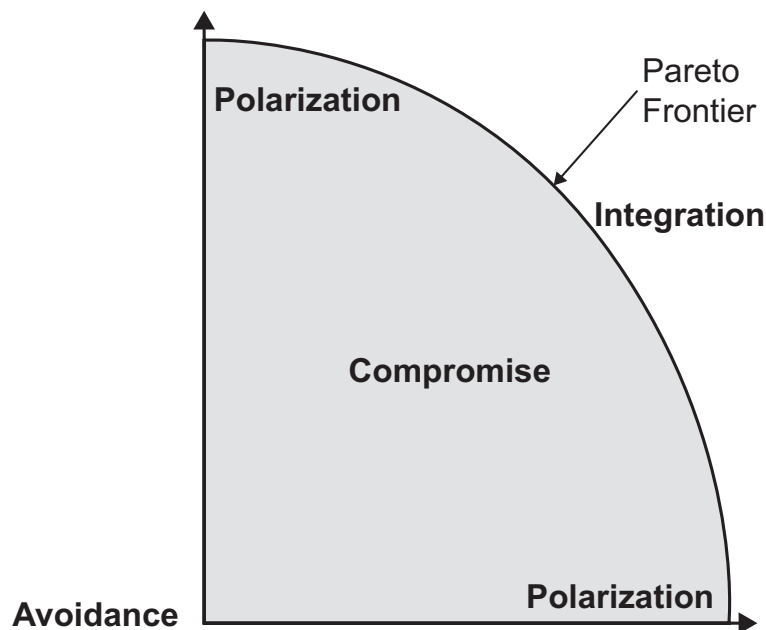


Figure 9.8 Dual concern model of intercultural communication Source: Author

### 4.3 *Intercultural Synergy and the Flow Dynamics*

Whenever we find an example of unsuccessful intercultural interaction (and we have discussed quite a few of those in this book), we realize that in such situations people do not see the need or refuse to work together. They spend a lot of their energy trying to accomplish a task—and fail or never completely succeed: in such cases, intercultural communication does not flow. The problem is that ‘flow’ is synergistic by definition: it requires that people work together, not without and not against one another.

Some of the most well-known research in the area of Flow Dynamics has been done by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a well-known a Hungarian-American psychologist, who defined and described the **flow states** as the peak experiences whereby people realize their potential and find optimal solutions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Every flow state involves a sense of discovery, a feeling of creating a new reality and moving to a higher level of performance. In such states, whatever we do just ‘flows,’ with a new level of attainment reached and new strengths discovered. In such cases, a solution becomes a pleasurable and triumphant experience. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner note, the word ‘solution’ among other things means:

a combination formed by dissolving something into a more fluid medium. When a solution is found to a problem, the hard edges of that problem dissolve and the separate identities of skills and challenges are transcended. One flows into the other like an onrushing stream of energy.

(2002, p. 116)

It is exactly what takes place when people from different cultures work together, realizing their full potential. People may, and often do, put tremendous effort in their intercultural interactions, but the overall flow state is still desirable and enjoyable because everyone is satisfied with this optimal experience.

If we look at the main approaches to resolving conflict, discussed in Chapter 8, we can see that, when people attempt to work without one another (avoidance), against one another (polarization), or with one another but only halfway (compromise), the process is a tug-of-war: the line between different parties is fixed and resources are simply distributed but not integrated. It is only when parties cooperate that a shared space is created where intercultural communication can flow. With integration, people cross this line in both directions, and, instead of one fixed line, there are now two dynamic lines—and an area in between! (Figure 9.9).

Now, there is a space where people can actually move back and forth—an area where intercultural interaction can truly flow. This area can be seen as a shared continuous space (continuum), discussed in Chapter 6, or as a pendulum movement, discussed in Chapter 7, or as a negotiation zone, discussed

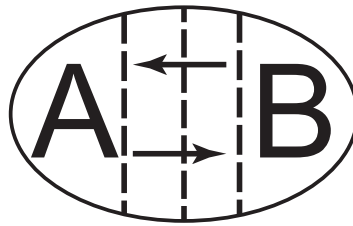


Figure 9.9 Intercultural communication as integration Source: Author

in Chapter 8. This area continuously changes, simultaneously connects and keeps apart people from interacting cultures, which is accomplished through a process of transaction. This way, people from different cultures are able to fully realize their potential and keep redrawing the lines between themselves to mutual satisfaction. And so we have come full circle and returned to the importance of boundary lines, discussed in Chapter 1. As you recall, every boundary line is an idea, and we now can see that the most constructive idea of a boundary line is one of synergy.

Intercultural communication flows result in various degrees of **complexity**. Overall, three main levels of **hierarchy** can be identified: any system consists of smaller subsystems ('subsystems') and is embedded within larger systems ('suprasystems'). For example, the sibling subsystem exists within the nuclear family system, which is in turn part of an extended family suprasystem. It is important to note that boundaries between different cultures are permeable and determined by what needs to be accomplished since systems in intercultural communication are "all working together to achieve some goal" (Wiseman, 2003, p. 199). Every system, of course, seeks to achieve a particular goal: for instance, the goal of any intercultural family can be seen as ensuring the continuation of life through procreation and socialization, the goal of an international joint-venture business as producing products and profit, etc. All systems, though, whatever their particular goals may be, work to maintain homeostasis—the state of equilibrium or balance. Families, for example, attempt to fit in with their neighbors and friends, businesses with their suppliers and clients, etc. So, whenever changes occur in the system or its environment, whenever new demands require adaptation and adjustments, people within a system must experiment with new forms, become creative, engaging in what systems theorists refers to as **morphogenesis**—the ability of a system to change its form as it adapts and changes over time. It is crucial to realize that systems become more vulnerable as they cling to an existing homogeneous state of affairs in the face of inevitable change. In this light, the importance of adapting to greater cultural diversity cannot be overestimated.

When intercultural communication is understood as a synergistic process directed toward 'flow states' when people realize their potential and

the outcome of their interaction reaches a new state, we should not be deceived by the word ‘state’: it is not a destination that can be reached once and for all. Every state is part of the overall and never-ending process of intercultural interactions, grounded in non-summativity and striving toward Pareto optimality. Can we conceptualize the overall goal of intercultural interactions in more detail? Can it be presented in more exact terms, perhaps even in simple mathematical terms? We will discuss this in the next chapter.

## 5 The Synergy Principle Defined

Right now, let us give a more concise formulation of Synergy Principle, based on the above discussion of its three parts.

First, as people from different cultures work together and integrate their potential, they are able to achieve an outcome that cannot be achieved by any one culture individually; this idea is known as non-summativity.

Second, non-summativity allows different cultures to reach the optimal agreement for all sides. Such an agreement is reached when all options have been tried and the outcome cannot be further improved upon without making one of the sides worse. This outcome is known as the Pareto optimality or the efficiency frontier. Overall, truly successful intercultural communication as a synergistic process is directed toward Pareto optimality.

Third, intercultural communication can be viewed as a synergistic process of ‘flow states’ when people from different cultures realize their potential and the outcome of their interaction reaches a new level.

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

*Intercultural communication is a process whereby people from different groups work to integrate their resources and interests striving toward an optimal result that cannot be achieved by people from any culture individually.*

## 6 Case Study: ‘The Case of AMD: Unleashing Intercultural Potential’

This case study is based on the chapter entitled ‘Creating a hyperculture: Martin Gillo, Advanced Micro Devices,’ taken from the book *21 leaders for the 21st century: How innovative leaders manage in the digital age* by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (2002). As usual, it is recommended that you read the chapter in its entirety; below, you find a summary of the chapter.

Be ready to identify and then discuss the following topics:

1. What were some of the perceptual challenges faced by the cultures of AMD?
2. How were those challenges overcome?
3. What was the outcome of unleashing the intercultural potential of AMD?

In 1995, Advanced Micro Devices (AMD), a large U.S. chip maker, decided to build a mega-factory near Dresden in the former East Germany. AMD was to produce state-of-the-art microprocessors equivalent or even superior to those of Intel. AMD was dedicated to producing the chip that entered the market under the AMD Athlon brand name. People from three cultures were going to come together at AMD: U.S., West German, and East German. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner note that, according to their research, cultural differences between people from East Germany and West Germany are at least as large as those between West Germany and people from other European cultures.

Making a microchip is an extremely complex process that requires the harmonious work of all parties involved. In this sense, the business of AMD depended upon the fine-tuning of communication between people from three different cultures. The operation could become a highly profitable business and a feat of intercultural integration, but it could also prove a disaster.

Cultural clashes and misperceptions were unavoidable.

There were tensions between the U.S. and West German sides. First of all, there were still strong U.S. opinions about Germany as a country of too many laws and regulations. Also, from the U.S. perspective, German engineers are too rational and too cerebral and prefer to work individually while avoiding spontaneous group discussions and brainstorming. From the West German perspective, the Americans shoot from the hip without taking careful aim; in other words, they do not take time individually to think through their problems and come to a rational conclusion. Naturally, there was also a language barrier problem; the U.S. managers preferred to hold their brainstorming sessions in English where ideas could be developed freely while the Germans wanted to present their ideas in German and in a more formal setting.

There were tensions between the West German and East German sides. Many East Germans perceived West Germans as arrogant and rejected their tendency toward consumerism and superiority. Many East Germans still felt that the West Germans did not honor their East German compatriots enough for their courage during the oppression by the Stasi (secret police). East Germans, on their part, were still sometimes perceived as 'backwater' because of the years of the communist regime. However, East German 'backwardness' was by no means uniform; in some respects, East Germany was ahead of West Germany. For example, East Germany awarded many technical degrees for highly skilled manual labor including that of semiconductor technician.

The AMD startup team rejected the approach whereby the U.S. cultural practices would be imposed. Instead, they chose the approach of cultural symbiosis—a process by which people from the United States, West Germany, and East Germany combine their preferences and integrate their potential. In this process, each culture's potential is strengthened through the others; as a result, the overall intercultural potential of AMD was unleashed. The so-called systematic experimentation method was endorsed at AMD; the systematic part appealed to German rationality, while the experimentation part appealed to American improvisation.

The AMD startup team first considered alternating German-style formal meetings one week and American free-form brainstorming sessions the next. However, such a solution would not be optimal because no real exchange between the two sides takes place; in other words, one side's potential is not strengthened through the other. So, a different meeting format was designed that opened with American-style brainstorming sessions with ideas encouraged from anyone; also, a formal reflective process was set up when ideas would be presented and summarized. Whenever appropriate, ideas were written down and posted on boards during the brainstorming sessions; that way, those not very confident of their verbal skills could also add ideas more easily. AMD's *lingua franca* was English; however, meetings were held in both English and German, and anyone could express an idea in either language without any recrimination. As a result, both sides gradually began to change: the Americans began to learn the skills of more rational deliberation, while the Germans began to learn more dynamic skills of brainstorming and improvisation. As a result, the sides began to integrate their forces, reaching new states. Each such state was seen as a peak experience which occurred when the integrated intercultural potential of AMD was unleashed. Suddenly, all the former challenges were overcome and realized in a moment of combined attainment. Incidentally, Martin Gillo, AMD's CEO, had been fascinated for many years by the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, especially his description of flow states. Martin Gillo had published his own in-house pamphlets promoting the idea of a stimulating engagement with the task at hand. Such continuous engagement with every task resulted in the overall success of AMD. The Dresden operation was pronounced the most successful start-up in the history of the company, while the 0.18-micron copper version of the AMD Athlon microprocessor was the most advanced in AMD's worldwide operations.

Now let us see how this case study can be an illustration of the Synergy Principle of intercultural communication.

1. What were some of the perceptual challenges faced by the cultures of AMD?

It was easy for the cultures of AMD to fall into the trap of stereotyping when dealing with each other. For example, the East Germans could have conceptualized their West German colleagues as arrogant and lacking compassion. On their part, the West Germans could have conceptualized their East German colleagues as 'backwater' because of the years of the communist regime. However, the West German individuals turned out to be quite friendly and willing to work together, while the East German individuals turned out to be highly skilled as semiconductor technicians.

Also, it was easy for the cultures of AMD to fall into the trap of prejudging each other, developing a negative attitude. For example,

the U.S. side could have decided that because Germany had numerous laws and regulations and because its engineers were too rational and too cerebral, their collaboration would be ineffective. For their part, the West German side could have decided that, because Americans were too carefree and never thought through their problems, their collaboration would be ineffective.

Fortunately, such perceptual challenges as overgeneralizations (stereotypes) and prejudgments (prejudices) that could have prevented the cultures of AMD from successful collaboration were overcome.

2. How were those challenges overcome?

These potential challenges were overcome through the approach of cultural symbiosis—a process by which people from the United States, West Germany, and East Germany combine their preferences and integrate their potential. In this synergistic process, each culture's potential was strengthened through the others. For example, the so-called systematic experimentation method was endorsed at AMD, the systematic part appealing to German rationality and the experimentation part appealing to American improvisation.

As one manifestation of this method, the AMD startup team decided not to alternate German-style formal meetings with American free-form brainstorming sessions. Such a solution would simply be a compromise because no real change in the two sides would take place; in other words, one side's potential would not be strengthened through the other. So, a different meeting format was designed, blending American-style brainstorming sessions with a formal reflective process. Also, English and German were integrated, as anyone could express an idea in either language without any recrimination, either orally or by writing ideas down and posting them on boards during meetings. As a result, the sides changed: the Americans learned the skills of more rational deliberation, while the Germans learned dynamic skills of brainstorming and improvisation. This way, the sides moved beyond compromise, integrating their forces to reach a new state.

3. What was the outcome of unleashing the intercultural potential of AMD?

The outcome of unleashing the intercultural potential of AMD was the harmonious work of all the sides involved. The business of AMD depended upon the fine-tuning of communication between people from three different cultures; because their interactions were flowing smoothly, the operation became a highly profitable business and a feat of intercultural integration. Their continuous engagement with every task resulted in the overall success of AMD; the Dresden operation was pronounced the most successful startup in the history of the company, while one of their microprocessors turned out to be the most advanced in AMD's worldwide operations.

## 7 Side Trips

### 7.1 Stereotypes in Hollywood Movies

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to various stereotypes in Hollywood films; common examples include the portrayal of Asians as nerdy, black men as dangerous, and Latinas as fiery. According to the 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Hollywood still has a long way to go (Schacht, 2019) to overcome stereotypical cultural presentations.

\*\* Do you agree with this assessment of Hollywood films? Can you think of examples to support or disprove it?

### 7.2 Can AI be Biased?

For many people, the appeal of artificial intelligent systems is that they can make impartial decisions. However, machine learning is said to have a dark side, for algorithms are developed by humans and reflect basic human assumptions; as a result, machines can be as prejudiced as the people from whom they learn. One example is the racist history behind facial recognition (Chinoy, 2019). It is argued that we should not give up using AI machines, but we should be aware of these problems. Also, we should remember that AI is all about how the world *has been*, not how it *ought to be*: that's up to us to decide (Resnick, 2019).

\*\* Do you agree that AI can be biased? If yes, can you give concrete examples of such bias in intercultural communication?

### 7.3 Addressing Prejudiced Statements

Dr. Beatrice Fennimore in her article 'Addressing prejudiced statements' (Fennimore, 1994) suggests that a productive response to a prejudiced statement can be formulated using the following steps: (1) pulling the prejudice out of the statement and restating it a calm and objective way; (2) stating personal beliefs in a clear and assertive way; (3) making a positive statement about the specific targets of the prejudice; and (4) gently turning the subject to a new direction.

\*\* What is your opinion of this approach to addressing prejudiced statements? Can you think of other steps that could be added to such response?

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