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Article

Ethnocentrism, Bias and the Culture Definition Problem

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1.0 Introduction

In this paper, we discuss how cross-cultural communication is affected by cognitive biases that are often reinforced by the way we regard culture. Although the study of cognitive bias is within the field of cognitive psychology, it frequently overlaps with Intercultural Communication (IC) contexts. Biases are a natural part of the thinking process that allow us to take mental shortcuts to process the overabundance of stimuli in our environments. This is particularly applicable in IC contexts because we are surrounded by new cultures and people along with different stimuli cues that require quick interpretation. We first discuss how particular definitions of culture itself can influence ethnocentric thinking and specific types of stereotypes in cross-cultural contexts. We then move on to discussing the intertwining concepts of ethnocentrism, stereotype, cultural schema and bias. Several bias categories are particularly prone to negatively affecting cross-cultural interaction and the misinterpretation of others' intended meaning. We argue that once cultural biases are initially formed, they often result in unique and deep-rooted cultural schemas that can continually affect cross-cultural communication outcomes. By highlighting cognitive aspects of cultural schema, deep cultural knowledge can be brought out of the unconscious mind of cultural schema and into a conscious level of understanding where it can be better understood and studied to avoid unnecessary ethnocentric thinking and interpretations.

2.0 Defining ethnocentrism and stereotyping

In section 3.0, we shall discuss how the way we see and think about culture may encourage ethnocentrism and stereotyping. First, however, let us now define these two terms. The terms ethnocentrism and stereotyping are similar but refer to different areas within the same abstract meaning. Ethnocentrism is basically defined as, "*the attitude that one's own group, ethnicity, or nationality is superior to others.* (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). We can see that the definition of ethnocentrism is quite broad, negative in meaning and can be applied intra-culturally (within the same cultural group) as well as inter-culturally (outside our cultural in-group). Because ethnocentrism is an attitude or a mindset, it operates at a cognitive level as a schema or preexisting set of knowledge. Schema exists as an unconscious level of thinking formed by years of experience and interactions that underpin our values and norms which we use to make judgments of others' behavior. An ethnocentric mindset views one's own culture as the standard by which to judge other cultures. This standard becomes established and made accessible through learned cultural background knowledge or cultural schema. Although we certainly learn some biases and apply them through cultural schema, most researchers (Kahneman 2011) tend to agree with Allport (1954) that ethnocentrism is also a natural phenomenon and not necessarily negative as we tend to value individuals in our in-group communities in a largely positive way. However, ethnocentrism tends to have a larger negative impact on the minority cultural group (C2) and second language speaker. Some authors (see Lee and Rice 2007, Goundiam 2024) describe how ethnocentrism can affect the C2 speaker. For instance, regarding immigrants trying to fit into the dominant culture (C1) office or classroom culture "…may be subjected to discrimination, bias and racism. I myself have been isolated and bullied, and I've faced language barriers as a francophone; even after all these years, my mind works differently than those whose first language is English. These factors can hinder your growth" (Goundiam, 2024). The author's experience is consistent with my own experience (33 years) as a (challenged) second language Japanese-speaking American living in Japan. But, I would also add here that the dominant culture native speaker may at times be unaware of their bias because of a lack of awareness of their cultural norms and values. Hence, a need for a cognitive approach to the study of culture.

While the term ethnocentrism applies a broad standard, stereotyping tends to be more specific to a particular image or person. Stereotyping can be defined as, "*a fixed idea or image that many people have of a particular type of person or thing, but which is often not true in reality and may cause hurt and offence*" (Oxford Learners' Dictionary, n.d.). Thus, stereotyping is more specific to persons or things while ethnocentrism focuses on comparing other cultural groups to our own. Stereotyping involves a natural mental process of simplifying and categorizing people from different groups based on broad generalizations for ease of recall and understanding. Although both stereotyping and ethnocentrism are natural human phenomena, when applied to groups of people they can easily lead to discrimination, cultural insensitivity, and minimization, if not recognized. In sum, ethnocentrism is a larger term more suitable for intercultural communication because we are often comparing two national group cultures while stereotyping is more specific to a person or symbol.

2.1 Background of stereotype

When we discuss stereotyping and aspects of the mind, we must acknowledge Allport's (1954) groundbreaking work in psychology that explored the concept of stereotyping as it applied to shaping prejudice and discrimination. He introduced a key hypothesis called the “contact hypothesis” which is particularly relevant to the field of Intercultural Communication education and training. This simple hypothesis suggests that positive face-to-face interactions between two distinct cultural groups can help reduce prejudice, discrimination, and challenge long-held stereotypes. For this reason, many universities and governments have established study abroad programs, internships, and scholarships to encourage foreign students to visit their institutions (and vice versa) to interact with others face-to-face. Unfortunately, in many countries, including the US and Japan, humanities and liberal arts programs that promote face-to-face intercultural interaction are continually under pressure of being defunded or are undervalued. A 2013 survey (Times Editorial Board) found that 90% of employers agreed that an applicant’s ability to solve complex problems, communicate clearly, think critically, and possess intercultural skills is important to their success. These skills are emphasized in most humanities curricula and help contribute to successful intercultural communication.

Although stereotypes can be harmful in forming negative attitudes towards other groups, Allport also contends that stereotypes, like its larger cousin ethnocentrism, are not inherently negative and provide cognitive shortcuts which allow us to process complex stimuli more easily thus smoothing communication and decision making especially within similar cultural groups. Jost and Hamilton (2005) give an overview of past research on stereotypes explaining how content for them is formed and categorized. The authors add that stereotypes diffuse meaning and legitimacy into social interactions and serve to “preserve and bolster the status quo” (p. 220). In Intercultural Communication we divide the native speaker (C1 culture) and non-native speaker (C2 culture) into two distinct national groups. Cognitive psychologists above label these groups as being advantageous or disadvantageous groups. From an IC perspective, the native speaker (C1) can not only be at an advantage, because of language competency, but also at a disadvantage because of the lack of C2 knowledge of the listener’s (C2) communication norms. However, it is almost always the C2 disadvantageous group that receives the brunt of the negative effects of ethnocentrism and stereotyping.

2.2 The process of cultural system justification

The paradox created by ethnocentrism and stereotyping is that by valuing our like-minded community members (C1), people from different backgrounds (C2), the out-group, tend to be minimized as a result. This minimizing or devaluing process of the outgroup creates a lack of empathy which in turn can easily result in discrimination and prejudice because it has become the standard in societal norms. For example, loss of human life due to natural disasters will almost always tend to be covered in the affected home country’s media more extensively than in faraway international media. Or, in the United States, those who can afford the best health care insurance and care (advantageous group) tend to believe that a higher-priced for-profit insurance system is perfectly acceptable because of a lack of affordability and accessibility does not affect them greatly due to their income level, political ideology or because they are benefiting in some way from the current system. Lack of empathy underpins a lack of effort (denial and minimization) to attempt to understand something that is different and perceived to be of less value than the current system thus completing a vicious cycle of ignorance and uncaring attitudes towards differences. When the dominant cultural group seeks to maintain an advantageous position in society by using existing institutional systems, and unspoken rules it is a phenomenon called *system justification process* (Jost and Hamilton, 2005). This term in cognitive psychology refers to a "psychological mechanism by which individuals tend to rationalize and defend existing social, economic, and political systems, even when those systems may be unfair or unequal. It is a cognitive bias that leads people to perceive these systems as more legitimate and just than they might actually be. This process plays a significant role in how people view and interact with the larger social world around them" (OpenAI 2023).

So, how does the cognitive psychology term "system justification process" apply to intercultural communication contexts? People from different cultural backgrounds perceive and interact with institutions and social systems very differently. For example, as mentioned above, in the US, a private healthcare system is used as opposed to a public one. Most people believe that private institutions are more efficient and serve the individual more effectively and believe that public institutions are related to "socialism" - a word that is perceived negatively in the US which strongly affects how people perceive and interact with government institutions. This type of belief system justifies a private health care insurance system that is not only more expensive and less accessible than a public option but has poorer health outcomes. Such kind of cognitive biases are "shaped and exacerbated by actual inequalities of opportunity in society (which prevent group memberships and achieved outcomes from varying freely) as well as by selective reporting in the mass media" (Josh and Hamilton, p. 214).

Another way that the system justification process applies to intercultural communication is the way cultural groups regard equality, justice and fairness. This process can "influence how individuals from different cultural backgrounds perceive and respond to perceived injustices within their societies. Some individuals may be more prone to justifying existing systems, even when they lead to inequities, while others may be more motivated to advocate for change. These differences in perception can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts during intercultural interactions" (OpenAI, 2023).

Cultural beliefs and values play a significant role in system justification. As mentioned above, some cultures like Japan, value collectivism, social hierarchy, (see Hofstede et.al. 2010) and high context communication styles (see Hall 1976). This cultural preference results in indirect or ambiguous communication strategies that highly prize social harmony in relationships. Therefore, when discussing sensitive topics like social issues or social systems, you are less likely to see open conflict or critical comments made in public or a room full of strangers. This tendency sharply contrasts with low power distance, and low context cultures that base communication on social equality.

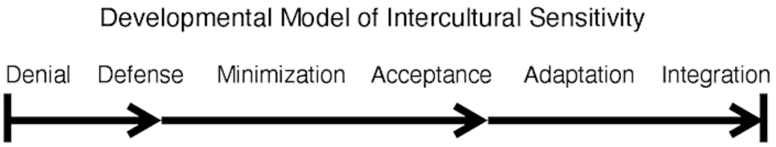
By understanding the role of system justification in intercultural communication contexts, we are empowered to develop effective cross-cultural communication strategies. In sum, understanding the system justification process of cognitive psychology provides a useful framework for understanding how individuals from different cultural backgrounds perceive and interact with social systems and institutions.

3.0 The culture definition problem

We can have a better understanding of cultural stereotyping by linking it to how we think about and define culture. The basic dictionary definition of culture starts with a superficial or surface approach by defining culture as something (e.g. art, food, clothing, music, etc) that results from human activity. Culture, regarded in this way, is something to be appreciated, seen, or used. Most dictionaries give a range of definitions suggesting that the definition of culture itself depends on context. For example, Webster's dictionary gives eight distinct definitions of culture ranging from “a set of values, conventions or social practices associated to particular field” to “ the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties ” (Merriam-Webster 2023). Culture seems to mean something different depending upon our context of study, work, or point of view. Therefore, how we regard culture makes it easier to form both positive and negative biases. For example, we sometimes connect food to cultural values, “Latin American food tends to be spicy because the people value passion in daily life” or “Japanese food is rather bland and simple showing the Japanese values of humility and simplicity”. We often stereotype entire generations as being of a certain type – “Millennials don't like to work as hard as the Baby Boomers.” Stereotyping and ethnocentric attitudes are a natural way humans try to understand complex stimuli. Humans stereotype especially when it is something we have little first-hand knowledge about - such as people living in different cultures. For example, we often stereotype entire nationalities or regions without much thought: “Latin Americans are passionate”, “Germans are efficient and organized” or “Japanese communicate ambiguously.” However, by approaching the definition of culture from a cognitive or mental perspective, we can more readily recognize how we interpret the behavior of others by being more aware of our point of view. Making a conscious effort to understand “the other” culture can also help build empathy a key component for increasing intercultural competence.

To avoid using “culture” to justify stereotypes, it is useful to think of culture in a way that can highlight cognitive bias. Shaules (2023) offers a useful way to define culture by organizing the way we think about it into three areas: culture as *being (identity), doing (behaviors) and seeing (understanding* *shared ways of interpretation).* First, culture as identity stresses a national identity and emphasizes pride in our own culture while clearly delineating us (my culture) and them (the other culture). Thinking of culture as "being" tends to reinforce ethnocentrisms based on national identity – "French take a lot of holidays" and "British people are reserved." It is often the result of a lack of experience, and what Kahneman (2011) calls *intuitive heuristics* or mental shortcuts because our mind is always searching for the easiest most accessible answers and familiarity. Biases such as *familiarity bias are* often the result. It takes mental effort to interpret new information or behavior and organize it into new categories for interpretation. Bennett (2011, 2017) labels (see Figure 1) this level of understanding of culture as Denial in his Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). That is, the thinking goes like this; "I don't need to understand other cultures because mine is the best." People who think in these simplistic terms often feel there is no need to know more about the other and are on the *Denial-Defensive* end of Bennett's intercultural competence scale.

Figure 1



(Bennett 2017)

Regarding culture as a national identity (being) is the most simplistic viewpoint that requires little introspection and, therefore, often results in perpetuating negative stereotypes and biases.

Another way of regarding culture, which can influence ethnocentric thinking, is to see culture from a *predictable set of behaviors* (doing) perspective (Shaules 2023). For example, expecting that all Japanese will bow instead of shaking hands or speak more politely to outsiders. Indeed, the vast majority may do so and regarding culture as an expected set of behaviors can be useful in many short-term situations, particularly business contexts, by helping us get by in novel cross-cultural contexts (e.g., don't immediately put a Japanese person's business card in your pocket after they give it to you). However, by reducing our understanding of culture to a set of predictable behaviors risks legitimizing current stereotypes and maintaining the current level of ethnocentrism by seeking to minimize differences. Of course, some people do indeed act differently than what is expected from the norm (e.g., Some Japanese are in fact not reserved but outgoing) and this diversity of divergent behavior from the cultural norms is why the study of intercultural communication can be challenging. Intercultural Communication seeks to highlight cultural patterns and tendencies to help both parties share a common understanding.

Understanding culture as a set of behaviors has useful benefits to the short-term sojourner but is also potentially harmful to long-term communication if it is the only cultural perspective we understand.

The final way of understanding and thinking about culture regards culture as *understanding shared ways of interpretation* (seeing). This perspective is the most complex and takes a cognitive perspective because perception plays a key role here. By regarding culture in this way, culture is seen as a shared way of understanding the stimuli around us. Do we share the same perception and interpretation of a particular gesture or use of speech? If not, why? This approach then takes cognitive effort and highlights the *need to understand what norms are typical in our own cultural value system not only the other*. "We acquire our cultural beliefs, values and communication norms often on a very unconscious level. Without a comparative basis, we may never question the way we have been conditioned and socialized in our primary cultural system. Cultural socialization, in one sense, encourages the development of ethnocentrism" (Ting-Toomey and Chung 2012, p. 14).

As Shaules (2023) states, mixing these three perspectives of being, doing and seeing often causes confusion when trying to understand culture. Critics will often say, "If Japanese people are so polite then why does my friend Taro speak very directly and rudely?" (culture as doing perspective). Another criticism suggests that, "we should regard people as unique individuals rather than stereotyping them as cultural beings." This point of view minimizes (see Ryan 2020) cultural differences and cedes power to the dominant cultural group. These types of viewpoints are also counterproductive for several reasons. First, if we fall into the cognitive trap of trying to understand culture solely from a being or doing or solely humanistic perspective, we fall into what Bennett (2011) calls the *minimization stage* of the intercultural sensitivity model. Minimization occurs when minority individuals are believed to be "just like us" and differences are unconsciously minimized, or disregarded, thereby ceding power, and decision-making to the majority (see system justification process in cognitive psychology, Section 3.1). Being a unique individual and sharing ways of understanding has never been mutually exclusive. To recognize unique or individualistic behavior, a shared understanding of what is regarded as typical behavior in the first place is necessary. If an intercultural trainer walked into an intercultural competence training seminar and suggested to the participants that we are all individuals, there is no big C culture, and we only need to see others as a unique individual, then besides some angry seminar participants, a "minimization" of differences is promoted and culture as "being" perspective becomes a schema or an unconscious knowledge default position.

In sum, culture internalizes our beliefs, values, and communication norms but this process also encourages further reinforcement of ethnocentrisms in the form of hard-to-change schema unless we can compare our communication differences to another cultural system of norms and values while being more aware of how we define culture itself.

3.1 Forming schema and bias

The parable of the blind encountering an elephant for the first time is a useful metaphor for how we often deal with information from a particular cultural point of view. The Buddhist parable originates from the ancient Buddhist text *Tittha Sutta* from c. 500 BCE (Wikipedia, n.d.). The story goes as follows:

> *Six blind men are brought to examine an elephant that has come to their village.*
> *The first man touches the trunk and says that the elephant is like a thick snake.*
> *The second man touches the tusk and says that the elephant is like a spear.*
> *The third man touches the ear and says that the elephant is like a fan.*
> *The fourth man touches the leg and says that the elephant is like a tree.*
> *The fifth man touches the side and says the elephant is like a wall.*
> *The sixth man touches the tail and says the elephant is like a rope.*
> *Each of the blind men is convinced that he is right, and that everyone else is wrong.*
>
> (Bloom, n.d.)

The story suggests that while one's subjective experience can hold truth, it is also quite limited due to its failure to account for the truths of others or the totality of them. Likewise, in cross-cultural communication, we interact with others who hold different subjective experiences resulting in unique world viewpoints, opinions, values and norms. Without descending into a simple form of cultural relativism, a cognitive approach to intercultural communication seeks to find those patterns of differences and explain how or why they came to be in the first place. Armed with this knowledge, communication can improve building trust and empathy making it easier to correctly interpret and share the same meanings.

If interpretation is the key factor in sharing understanding, then a cognitive approach to understanding and highlighting intercultural communication patterns becomes paramount. The process of stimuli interpretation starts with our perception. The process starts with the selection of what our cultural schema tells us to recognize as the key stimuli, then we use our experience to organize this information and then the final interpretation follows. If we have no experience with elephants, such as with the six blind men, we make our best guess based on what we have experienced in our own cultural context.

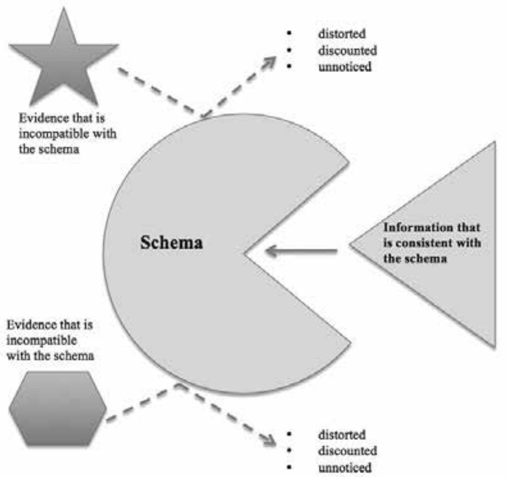
We know that to communicate efficiently, we need to take mental shortcuts (see Kahneman's intuitive heuristics 2011) and simplify the complex world of stimuli surrounding our busy journey through daily life. Taking mental shortcuts to increase efficiency in thinking and communication involves the use of schema or schemata (pl.). This has a wider meaning than the term "cultural construct" which refers to a specific belief or understanding about something in the world shared by members of the same culture. *Schemata are mental representations that organize our knowledge, beliefs and experiences into easily accessible categories*. Research has shown that our behavior is connected to the type of information we store in our brains (Nishida 2005, p. 402). Thus, schemata provide a structure or framework of interpretation for our mental biases. Nishida (2005) identifies eight types of cultural schemas: fact-and-concept schema, person schema, self-schema, role schema, context schema, procedure schema, strategy schema, and emotion schema. These schemata activate preexisting knowledge such as problem-solving strategies and social role expectations. Each framework greatly aids in making sense of complex information and guides us to be able to communicate efficiently. However, schemata, because of their simplified framework, also result in unconscious biases that have the potential to be harmful to sharing the same meaning in the cross-cultural communication process. For example, when I first lived in Japan and rented an apartment, I contacted my landlord about an old air conditioner that was not cooling well. The telephone conversation in Japanese went something like this (M=me, L=landlord):

M: Hello. I'm calling about my air conditioner. It is not cooling well.
L: Is that so…. have you tried cleaning it?
M: Yes, I have tried, but it still is not working well.
L: Yes, I understand.
M: It looks quite old. So, can it be replaced?
L: I will contact the owner….but I think it will be difficult.
M: OK, well, tell him that I will be happy to help him if he needs it.

In this short exchange, I did not have the Japanese schemata for "indirect refusals" (i.e. "It will be difficult") as this information was inconsistent with my own English low-context, direct style of communication. As a result, I misunderstood the landlord to mean, "although it will be difficult to do the work, it is possible to have a new one installed." The Japanese phrase むずかしです ,or *it is difficult*, is a common way to indirectly refuse a request without directly saying "no" in Japanese. This communication strategy is inconsistent with native English speakers' schemata and so the meaning has become distorted to fit my existing C1 schemata.

As this example shows, schema bias represents our core (cultural) beliefs and is resistant to change. This resistance creates hidden biases that influence how we interpret communicative behavior among other things. Information that does not fit tends to be unrecognized, ignored, rejected, distorted, or minimized, while information that fits our schema tends to make the existing schema stronger (see Figure 2).

Figure 2


Evidence that is incompatible with the schema
- distorted
- discounted
- unnoticed
Schema
Information that is consistent with the schema
Evidence that is incompatible with the schema
- distorted
- discounted
- unnoticed

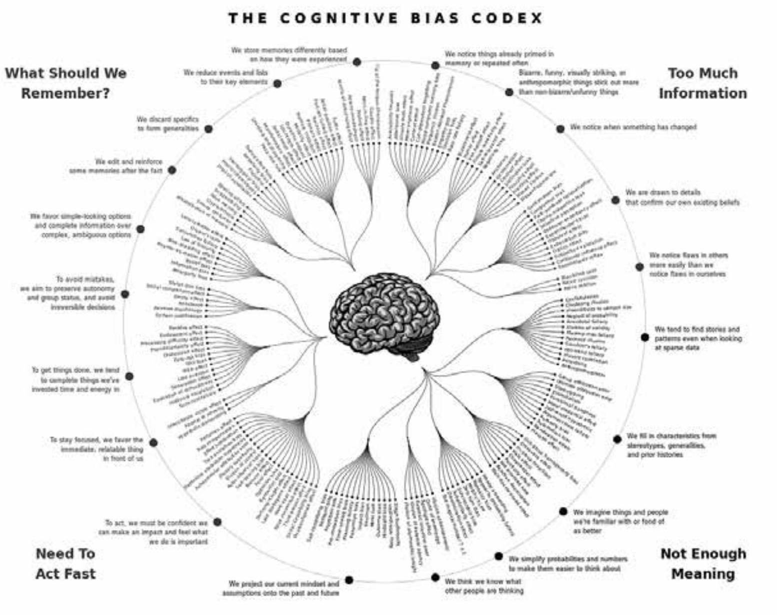
(Schema Bias Worksheet. Psychologytool.com)

Looking at Figure 2 above, existing schema tends to be resistant to conflicting new information because it takes more mental effort to incorporate it. We tend to follow the path of least resistance and allow information that already fits with our preexisting set of knowledge to make decision-making easier and more efficient. Because individuals construct their subjective reality on their biased interpretations of input, a cognitive bias is formed that affects behavior and decision-making. Having too much information often results in confirmation bias, expectation bias and a host of other biases (see cognitive bias codex, section 4.0).

4.0 Cognitive Bias Codex

Understanding cognitive biases is a helpful way to highlight ethnocentrism and specific types of stereotypes that we may have in intercultural communication contexts. The cognitive bias codex wheel (see Figure 3) visually highlights a prodigious number of biases. In total, 188 cognitive biases have been identified and coded into four categories: 1) what should we remember? 2) too much information 3) not enough meaning 4) need to act fast. If these biases can indeed be applied to communication contexts for two speakers of the same culture (C1-C1), the effect they have on intercultural communication (C1-C2) are most likely larger because the second language speaker (C2) is using a unique set of learned norms and values to interpret the native speaker's (C1) intended message. In addition, language competency and intercultural competence play a strong role in meaning negotiation as the second language speaker may be unaware of communication rules and/or lack the language competency to employ them correctly to reach the correct interpretation. While we are continually constructing a worldview, we use our previous experience to interpret specific events. We react to the stimuli around us quickly utilizing what we already know and have experienced. Because the world around us contains too many stimuli to mentally process, we select the stimuli that we learned how to perceive as important, or different. Thus, we are culturally conditioned to select certain stimuli and while ignoring others. The term “bias” results from this process. When we are operating in a foreign context or under stress, we are more susceptible to biases because of the unique patterns and norms of each respective culture valued in communication.

Figure 3


THE COGNITIVE BIAS CODEX
What Should We Remember?
We store memories differently based on how they were experienced
We reduce events and lists to their key elements
We discard specifics to form generalities
We edit and reinforce some memories after the fact
We favor simple-looking options and complete information over complex, ambiguous options
To avoid mistakes, we aim to preserve autonomy and group status, and avoid irreversible decisions
To get things done, we tend to complete things we've invested time and energy in
To stay focused, we favor the immediate, relatable thing in front of us
To act, we must be confident we can make an impact and feel what we do is important
Need To Act Fast
We project our current mindset and assumptions onto the past and future
We notice things already primed in memory or repeated often
Bizarre, funny, visually striking, or anthropomorphic things stick out more than non-bizarre/unfunny things
Too Much Information
We notice when something has changed
We are drawn to details that confirm our own existing beliefs
We notice flaws in others more easily than we notice flaws in ourselves
We tend to find stories and patterns even when looking at sparse data
We fill in characteristics from stereotypes, generalities, and prior histories
We imagine things and people we're familiar with or fond of as better
We simplify probabilities and numbers to make them easier to think about
Not Enough Meaning
We think we know what other people are thinking

(Wikipedia Commons, 2023)

While the Cognitive Bias Codex (see Figure 3) identifies 188 biases falling under four categories of bias two of these categories (3 and 4) are particularly disruptive to intercultural communication contexts.

4.1 Category 3 – the need to act fast (in unfamiliar cultural contexts)

In real-time communication, we *need to act fast* in order to process the information we hear and see. However, information that comes too quickly overloads our ability to assimilate and function effectively. Therefore, we must rely on previous experience and norms of our C1 to interpret information. Status quo bias falls under the need to act fast category of the codex. This bias occurs because of the human tendency to favor information that is immediate and relatable as opposed to distant and delayed. Humans have a constant need to simplify to interpret the fluid flow of external stimuli. When applied to a cross-cultural context, speakers will default to unique forms of the status quo depending on the framework of our cultural schema. For instance, in the Japanese workplace, team members working on a common project tend to avoid singling out individual achievements to maintain group harmony and the hierarchy within the group. This approach is consistent with what Hofstede labels "high power distance" cultures where social roles are more defined by age, rank and status-based credibility (Hofstede 2010, p. 74). The result of any individual recognition will often result in humble and ambiguous language (e.g. "I don't think I deserve this award. My teammates deserve as much credit. I couldn't have done it without them"). The preference contrasts with individualistic cultures where individual achievements are normally highlighted and whose language will be more direct and egocentric (e.g. "Thank you for this award. I worked hard to achieve my goal. I appreciate the help from my teammates."). The status quo for high context cultures is to recognize other in-group members and deflect individual credit to reinforce in-group social harmony while low power cultures openly accept individual recognition as it reinforces one's individuality and status.

4.2 Category 4 – not enough meaning (for the C2 speaker)

Perhaps the biggest obstacle for Intercultural Communication is category number 4) not enough meaning bias category. The second language speaker is not only dealing with interpreting complex stimuli but also struggling with language competency which forces a stronger reliance on past experience and cultural norms to decipher the native speaker's true meaning.

When context does not have enough meaning, we unconsciously fill in the gaps of missing knowledge based on personal beliefs and experience. This leads to stereotyping and is probably the most harmful cross-cultural hidden bias. Social psychologists (see Tversky and Kahneman 1974) have attempted to describe how the process of simplification in thinking works. They have labeled it as intuitive heuristics taking mental shortcuts to solve complex, time-consuming tasks in an efficient manner. When we are faced with a complex question that takes mental effort, we tend to default to our existing schemata so that we can justify or simplify in order to answer the question. Psychologists use intuitive heuristics to explain how when we are, "faced with a difficult question, we often answer an easier one instead, usually without noticing the substitution" (Kahneman, 2011, p.12). If the default schemata differ between two culturally diverse speakers, then it is easy to imagine that the easier question being answered would also differ.

In-group and out-group biases tend to be stronger in high context cultures than low context cultures. But this does not mean people who do this are necessarily unfairly biased or wrongly stereotyping. High context cultures find greater meaning in in-group contexts than out which helps them communicate more efficiently albeit with more ambiguity. Not having enough meaning allows us to continue using mental shortcuts to interpret complex cultural behavior. This makes it much easier to draw what Hofstede calls “moral circles” around those in our in-group to help us delineate those who have “full rights and obligations” (2010, p. 12) while justifying the cultural system already in place (see section 2.1).

5. 0 Discussion

Recognizing communicative strategies that differ between cultures is the first step towards increasing intercultural competence and highlighting biases. We have argued that once cultural biases are initially formed, they often result in unique and unrecognized cultural schemas that can continually affect cross-cultural communication outcomes. By highlighting the cognitive aspects of cultural schema, deep cultural knowledge can be brought out of the unconscious mind of cultural schema and into a conscious level of understanding where it can be better understood to avoid unnecessary ethnocentric thinking affecting decision-making and interpretations.

The minimization of the C2 speaker is a psychological phenomenon known as *system justification process* that allows the existing social, economic and political systems of the dominant (C1) culture group to be preserved or bolstered as the status quo. Although Bennett (2004, 2011) identifies the minimization stage in his intercultural sensitivity development model, it is argued here that *cross-cultural minimization* is a term that is rarely specially identified and studied but deserves much greater attention and research as it relates to understanding cultural identity and the perpetuation of culture-based ethnocentrisms through schema.

Understanding culture as a shared way of understanding, rather than as a set of behaviors or identities, is another key to developing intercultural competence. By highlighting how our cultural values may cause ethnocentrism or stereotyping, we are better positioned to avoid unnecessary cognitive biases. Although most cognitive biases develop naturally through common experience, we cannot easily put ourselves in the others’ (C2) shoes without being aware of these unconscious schemata that can prevent the development of empathy – a key component in developing intercultural awareness (Bennett 1986). Because empathy is reported to be on the decline in modern-day society (Persson and Kajonius, 2016) there is a greater need than before for face-to-face cross-cultural interactions to develop and improve international relations and intercultural education.

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Ethnocentrism, Bias and the Culture Definition Problem

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Abstract

This paper describes how cross-cultural communication is affected by cognitive biases that are often reinforced by the way we regard culture. First, in section 2.0, we discuss the definitions of ethnocentrism and stereotyping before moving on to describe how stereotypes are formed and maintained through schema. In section 3.0, we discuss how culture in some definitions can be problematic and result in unrecognized ethnocentrisms preserving the advantageous positions in society for the dominant cultural group. It is argued that once a stereotype or cultural bias is initially formed, it often results in unique and deep-rooted cultural schemas that can continually affect cross-cultural communication outcomes. To avoid this, a cognitive approach to understanding cultural differences is suggested. We then move on to discussing the intertwining concepts of ethnocentrism, stereotype, cultural schema and bias. In section 4.0, we introduce the Cognitive Bias Codex and discuss several bias categories that are particularly prone to negatively affecting cross-cultural communication. By highlighting the cognitive aspects of cultural schema, deep cultural knowledge can be brought out of the unconscious mind of entrenched cultural schema and into a conscious level of understanding where it can be better understood and taught to begin the process of developing intercultural competence.