# THE ASSOCIATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNICATION & RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE ARAB WORLD

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This paper seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the importance of relationship in intercultural communication. The paper explores the diversity that characterizes the people and societies across the Arab world as well as the shared perspective of communication that puts a premium on relations and social context. To explain the significance of relationships, the paper introduces three lenses for viewing communication based on the nature of the relationships among the participants: assertive, associative, and harmonious. The associative perspective, which focuses on relational patterns of pair alliances, is used to highlight features found in the Arabic language, Islam and dominant social norms. Viewed from the associative perspective, relationships are not a tool for facilitating communication between two people or gaining intercultural "competence," but the core for understanding the process of communication itself. The paper concludes with implications that the associative perspectives have on teaching, student-teacher relations, orientation programs and cultural adjustment of U.S. students abroad.

## INTRODUCTION

In her 2009 *Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, editor Darla Deardorff called the "importance of relationships" one of three emerging trends in intercultural communication. The importance of relationships has long been recognized as one of the most recognized aspects found among the peoples across the Arab world (Barakat, 1993; Yousef, 1974; Nydell, 1998; Zaharna, 1995, 2009a, 2009b). From elaborate social greetings to strong family ties, and from the Berbers in Morocco to the Bedouins in Arabia, the primacy of relationships reigns. This paper presents a relationally-based view of communication, and by extension, intercultural "competence."  However, in a departure from the traditional practice of focusing on how culture influences the Other, I hope in this article to also highlight how culture influences research as well.

Since its inception as an academic discipline and profession, Western, and specifically U.S., perspectives have dominated the communication field.  As Peter R. Monge, the former president of the International Communication Association, remarked, "The preponderance of contemporary communication theory has been developed from the

singular perspective of the United States" (1998, p. 3). Indeed, the major scholars whose ideas and perspective helped establish communications as a formal discipline of study are American males. This includes Wilbur Schramm, who is widely recognized as the "father for communication" (Asante, Miike, & Yin, 2008), as well as his U.S. colleagues with whom he worked closely from 1945 to 1960 (Simpson, 1996). A similar American dominant strain is found in intercultural communication. An American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, is often referred to as the "father of intercultural communication" (Leeds- Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers, Hart & Miike, 2002). Hall's prolific writings (1958, 1966, 1976, 1983), and trained anthropological eye provided a model for studying and writing about the communication behaviors, patterns and perspectives that influence communication. His works coincide with the mushrooming of intercultural communication scholarship during the 1970s (Chen & Starosta, 1998). In Hart's (1999) study of the most cited authors in the intercultural field, the clear majority was Americans and male. It was this pool of imminent scholars that Darla Deardorff (2004, 2006) surveyed to develop her pyramid model of intercultural competence, which is rapidly becoming one of the most cited models, thus perpetuating the U.S. vision.

This U.S.-centered or mono-cultural perspective of communication has particularly important implications for intercultural communication scholarship. As intercultural scholars and anthropologists have long noted, culture influences not only communication, but also communication researchers who study the phenomenon. Not surprisingly, the most dominant feature in the U.S. culture, namely "individualism," is mirrored in conceptions of communication (Dissanayake, 1986; Kim, 2002 Kincaid, 1987), interpersonal communication (Yum, 1988, 2007; Miyahara, 2006) and intercultural communication (Asante et al. 2007; Ishii, 2006; Milhouse, Asante, & Nwosu, 2001).

Intercultural competence, as Spitzberg and Changon (2009) note, "is still largely viewed as an individual and trait concept" (p. 44). The centrality of the individual is clearly evident in intercultural competence with its focus on knowledge, comprehension, skills, and attitude of the communication interactants. An important implicit assumption of the individualist perspective is that the individual interactants, through their behaviors and perspectives, determine the communication process and outcomes. Intercultural competence similarly not only stresses behaviors or activities, but the results of those activities or "outcomes." As Deardorff (2006) points out, "the unique element" of her pyramid model of intercultural competence is its emphasis on the internal as well as external outcomes of intercultural competence. The word "competence" suggests a specific type of outcome. Koester, Wiseman and Sanders (1993) describe, "a coalescing of forces around the choice of competence rather than effectiveness,

success, understanding, or adjustment" (p. 6). The idea of goal-orientation is not questioned, but rather a necessity of globalization (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006).

Whereas the individual-based conception of "intercultural competence," has long been the dominant view within intercultural scholarship, relationally-based concepts are growing across the globe. This paper seeks to add to that growing trend which has relationships at the core of communication and communication "competence." I begin by first exploring the diversity that characterizes the people and societies in the Arab world as well as some misconceptions about the Arab world. I then discuss three perspectives on communication: assertive, associative, and harmonious. The associative perspective is used to highlight and explain communication features found in the Arab language, social norms, and Islamic religion. The paper concludes with implications of the associative perspective on identity and teaching in international education.

## OVERVIEW OF THE ARAB WORLD

The expressions "Arab world" and "Arab culture" are often used interchangeably to refer to a large swath of humanity that goes from Morocco on the western coast of North Africa to the Middle East, to the Arabian Sea in the Gulf. The estimated population is 338.4 million, with 65 percent under the age of 30 years.

Traditionally, the Arabic language has served as a powerful, defining feature of the Arab world, if not Arab culture (Chejne, 1965, Tamari, 2008). However for many of the ethnic groups found throughout the region, such as the Kurds, Berbers or Armenians, Arabic is a second or third language. While written Arabic has been standardized and is used in official documents and written media such as the newspapers, books and magazines across the region, spoken Arabic varies considerably. One finds differences in vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and pronunciation. Words for daily items (i.e., towel, tea pot, car) and foods (tomato, cauliflower, milk, bread) tend to be particularly tied to regional dialects.

Not only are there regional linguistic differences, but also cultural differences. Historically, there has been a tendency to view Arab culture as a monolithic cultural entity. However, a new generation of scholars is arguing that Arab culture should no longer be seen as singular, but rather as a group of diverse social customs representing a tapestry of cultures within the Arab world (Ayish, 1998, 2003; Feghali, 1997; Iskandar, 2008; Nydell, 2005). These scholars have also highlighted the importance of the influence of Islam on socio-cultural beliefs and behaviors (Mowlana, 2003).

The emerging distinctions between culture and cultures may stem in part from the difficulty in defining "Arab" (Feghali, 1997).  Arabs originated in the Arabia Peninsula (modern day Saudi Arabia and Yemen) and were associated most closely with Bedouin tribal traditions (Ayish, 1998, 2003).  The religion of Islam was also revealed in Arabia and Arabic is the language of the Islamic holy book, the Noble Quran.  With the spread of Islam, Arabs carried the religion and the language to south Asia, parts of Europe and across North Africa (Hourani, 1992; Chejne, 1965).  The intermingling of cultures – Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds, Berbers, and Nubians – is captured in the title of historian Albert Hourani's (1991) treatise, *A History of the Arab Peoples*.

Today, the League of Arab States serves as the most frequently cited reference point for defining the Arab world, and by extension culture(s) within the Arab world. This geo-political and economic entity originally established in 1945 now has twenty-two members.  The members span from Mauritania, Western Sahara, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya and Egypt  in North Africa, to Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia along the Horn of Africa, to Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, to Iraq and the Arabian peninsula, Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates.

One of the most prevalent misconceptions is that the Arab world is the same as the Islamic world.  However, the League of Arab States consists of 22 member states and territories and is confined mainly to North Africa, the Middle East and Gulf.  The Organization of the Islamic Conference consists of 56 members and spans across the African continent, the Middle East, South and Central Asia to the Far East.

Because of this confusion between Arabs and Islam, peoples and countries in geographic proximity to the Middle East are often confused with Arabs.  For example, Arabs are often confused with Turks and Iranians.  While Turkey and Iran are both predominantly Muslim countries and are sometimes included as part of the greater Middle East geopolitical dynamics, neither is an Arab country or part of the Arab World. Ethnically and linguistically, the Turks and Iranians are quite distinct from Arabs.

As such, not all Muslims are Arabs.  Muslims refers to a religious grouping. Muslims are adherents of the Islamic religion.  Arabs refers to an ethnic grouping, similar to other ethnic groups such as Persian, Kurdish, Turkish, or Pashtun.  There are approximately 1.5 billion Muslims who reside primarily in Islamic countries, but are also spread around the globe, including the United States and Europe.  Arabs as an ethnic group only account for 15 percent of the total global Muslim population and are concentrated geographically in the Middle East.  Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population is neither ethnically Arab nor located geographically in the Middle East.

India, which is often thought of as a predominantly Hindu country, has the second largest Muslim population.

Furthermore, not all Arabs are Muslims. While the dominant religion in the Arab world is Islam (approximately 90 percent), the region encompasses a host of religions. This is perhaps not surprising given that the Middle East is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. During the Crusades, Christianity was the dominant religion and large Christian population centers are found throughout Palestine, Lebanon and Syria. Lebanon, in fact, recognizes close to twenty different religious sects. Coptic Christians, a denomination of the early orthodox Christian church, are found in Egypt. Significant communities of Arab Jews reside in Morocco, Yemen and Iraq. Muslim sects include Sunni, Shi'ite as well as Druze and Alawite.

## Tapestry of Diversity and Similarity

The Arab world and the notion of "Arab culture" are infinitely more complex than at first glance. When one looks at the underlying factors that shape culture – language, religion, geography, historical, political and economic experiences –the rich tapestry of cultures within the larger brushstroke of Arab culture is not only easy to see but also hard to ignore. In addition to the diversity of religion and languages, mentioned above, there are also tremendous variations in history, geography, economics as well as politics. A snapshot of four Arab countries helps to illustrate the distinctions.

Morocco, found in the far Western coast of North Africa, has a population of 32 million. Its culture is heavily influenced by the Berbers, the dominant ethnic group. Arab culture was introduced during the spread of Islam in the 7th and 11th centuries. Later under French colonial rule, and for a time, French was the official language. Today, Arabic is the official language and the country has its own distinct "Moroccan Arabic."

Egypt is the most populous country in the Arab world and Africa, with more than 77 million inhabitants. Home of the Pharaohs, Egypt boasts over 6,000 years of recorded history. Egyptians constitute 91 percent of the population, with 90 percent of the population Muslim and 10 percent Christian. The former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser played a prominent role as a leader during the pan- Arab national movement (1950s-1970s). Egypt also has its own colloquial dialect, and thanks to its prolific film and communication productions, Egyptian Arabic is one of the most widely recognized dialects in the region.

Syria, located in the Levant, is home to a population of 19 million, 40 percent of whom are below the age of 15 years.  The Syrian capitol Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world and the seat of the Umayyad Empire, which took the Islamic religion to Spain.  Given Syria's proximity to the Holy Land, one finds great ethnic and religious diversity.  In addition to Arabs, there are Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Circassians.  Incidentally, Syrian entertainment productions, particularly its special drama series that air during the month of Ramadan, have begun to rival those from Egypt in the Arab world.

A final snapshot of countries in the Arab world is Bahrain.  Bahrain, which means "two seas," is an archipelago of 33 islands off the coast of Saudi Arabia located in the Arabian Gulf.  Its population just crossed the one million mark.  Despite being the smallest Arab country in terms of geographic area, comparatively speaking Bahrain is one of the most politically innovative.  In its second round of parliamentary elections held in November 2006, the first woman member of parliament was elected.  This opened the door for the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women by Royal Decree as well as the appointment of female ministers, judges and diplomats.  Bahrain's ambassador to the United States is a woman and Jewish.  The country is predominantly Muslim (89 percent are either Sunni or Shiite).  Other religions include Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Bahaism.  Bahrain is keen to promote itself as a regional media hub, which puts it in competition with neighboring Qatar (home of Al-Jazeera television) and the United Arab Emirates (home to the media city).

While diversity may indeed magnify the difficulty of achieving intercultural competence in the Arab world, the importance of relationships and social context are pivotal communication components for navigating the region's rich cultural terrain.  One sees the centrality of relationships in the observations of professionals and scholars across writings from communication-related disciplines.

Business communication scholars have spoken of establishing positive personal relationships as a prerequisite for conducting business in the Arab world (Almaney & Alwan, 1982).  Organizational scholars similarly link effective management practices in the region to one's ability to cultivate and manage relationships (Ali, A.1992, 1995; Hutchings & Weir, 2006).  Public relations scholars have proposed a distinctive Arab model based on relationship building, noting that the process involves "communication as a social ritual, rather than communication as transmission of information" (Vujnovic & Kruckeberg, 2005, p. 342). Similarly, former U.S. diplomats who served extensively in the Arab world, repeatedly emphasize the centrality of relationships in a recent collection on public diplomacy essays (Rugh, 2004).  As Ambassador Kenton Keith (2004) noted, "It is hard to overestimate the importance of personal relations in the Arab

world" (p. 15).  Lebanese sociologist Halim Barakat (1993) perhaps best captured the central importance of relationships in a region of great diversity in his book *The Arab World: Society, Culture & State*.  The importance of relationships serves as the springboard for the discussion of intercultural communication competence in the Arab world.

**Perspectives of Communication**

To capture the importance of relationships in communication in Arab societies, I have used the term "associative" perspective.  The term stems from my research on public diplomacy, specifically U.S. communication efforts directed toward the Arab world after 9/11 (Zaharna, 2010).  Initially, I followed my intercultural training and focused on the cultural differences in behaviors and perceptions of the two parties.  Specifically, I studied the "what" and "how" of U.S. communication and the public reaction in the Arab world.  What I began to realize was that the misunderstanding was not over differences in the various individual communication components, but rather the very nature of the communication process itself.  U.S. officials and Arab publics appeared to have very different assumptions about what and how to communicate – but more fundamentally – what they meant by "communication."

U.S. officials appeared to be operating on the assumption that "communication" was about information transfer between two separate entities; the U.S. and the Arab world. Officials vigorously sought to develop and disseminate what it thought would be effective and appropriate communication given the culture of the public.  However, the more the U.S. sought to deliver its message or "communicate," the less it was understood.  The public in the Arab world appeared to discount U.S. messages and kept speaking of U.S. relations.  For them, "communication" appeared to be centered on relationships, not information.  Each side appeared to have a clear idea about what the communication problem was as well as how to solve it.  For U.S. officials, the problem was lack of information.  For the Arab public, the problem was strained relationships.

Confusion and frustrations appeared to intensify particularly as each tried to "solve" what it perceived as the "communication problem."  Each participant appeared to clearly see the nature of the communication problem – and assume that the other party also saw the same problem in the same way.  The more one party appeared to not see or even deliberately ignore "the problem," the more the other party felt deliberately slighted.  The more aggressively one party tried to solve the problem, the more that party inadvertently compounded the intercultural dilemma.

Watching the unexpected communication difficulties of the United States, a communication giant, led me on a journey to re-examine some of the fundamental assumptions about communication.  I was particularly interested in non-Western perspectives of communication.  When people say they are "communicating," what do they mean?  What are they focused on?  What do they see as "communication problems," and by extension, "communication solutions"?
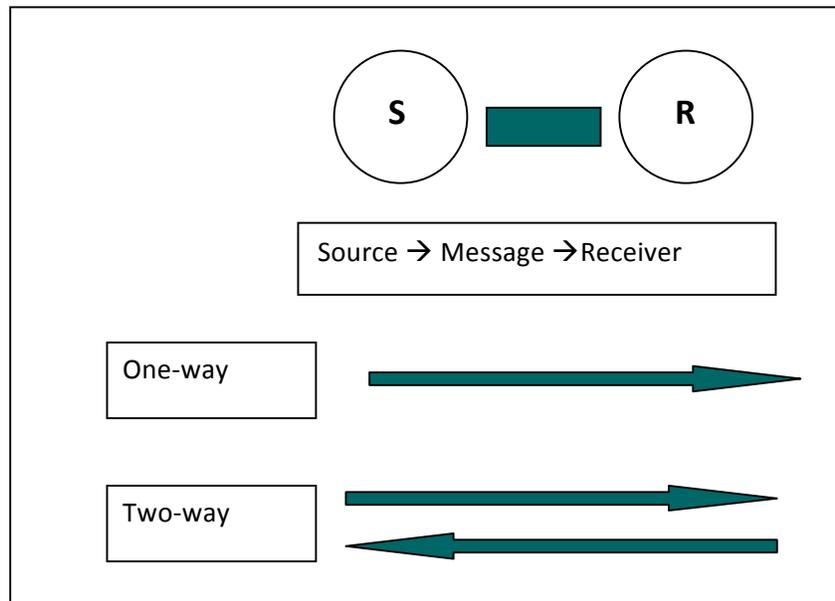
**Three Perspectives of Communication**

What grew out of my research were three perspectives of communication.  These are not labels to describe individual communication components such as behavior, language or worldview.  These are fundamentally different ways of viewing the very basic phenomenon of "communication."  The perspectives are informed by the emerging literature written by non-Western scholars as well as observations by Western scholars, including Carey's (1989) notion of "transmission and ritual communication," Hall's (1976) idea of "high and low context," and Fisher's (1987) "narrative paradigm" and individualism and collectivism (Triandis, 1995).

At first, two clear views emerge and closely parallel the literature found on Western and non-Western perspectives of communication (Zaharna, 2008).  Western literature appeared to focus on information and individuals.  Non-Western literature focused on relationships and social dynamics.  After exploring the non-Western literature more, a third perspective that reflects a more nuanced differentiation of relationships in the social context emerged.

The first lens or perspective for viewing communication can be called the "assertive perspective" (Zaharna, 2009b). The assertive perspective is based on the assumption that the communication parties are separate, distinct entities.  Because they are separate and distinct entities, communication is about transferring information, idea or knowledge from one party to the other party.  The focus or communication weight falls on the message.  Communication definitions capture this in their focus on meanings and messages conveyed through communication behaviors.  For example, John Condon and Fathi Yousef (1975), authors of one of the early influential works on intercultural communication, defined communication as "… any behavior that is perceived and interpreted by another, whether or not it is spoken or intended or even within the person's conscious awareness" (p. 2).  The diagram below illustrates the assertive perspective of communication.

Figure 1.  Assertive Perspective of Communication



The term "assertive" is used because the entities are separate and communication occurs when one party initiates the process.  The assertive perspective tends to view communication problems in terms of information.  The information is either inaccurate or insufficient.  Because the communicator is primarily responsible for the communication, it is up to the communicator to try to correct the communication problem by providing more or better information. Concretely this may mean changing what a message said or how a message was sent.

A critical assumption of the assertive view is that the individual is responsible for and has influence over the communication process and outcomes.  Specifically, the individual's verbal and nonverbal behaviors as well as perspective largely determine the communication.  From the assertive perspective, communication competence is an individual attribute of the communicator.  Successful communication occurs when the communication message sent by the source reaches the receiver.  Skilled communicators are adept at designing and delivering messages that achieve their intended goal with their intended receivers.  Competent communicators not only understand others but are also understood by others.  Intercultural competence, as Spitzberg (1989) noted, is both "effective" in that the communication achieves the communicator's goal and "appropriate" for the receiver's communication sensibilities.
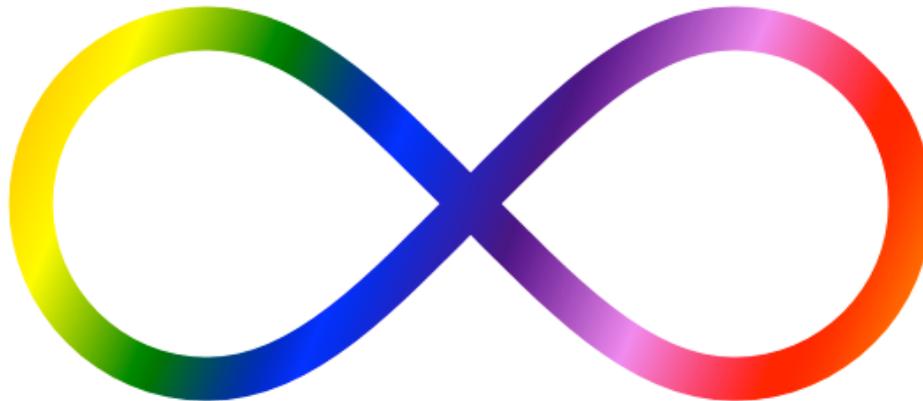
A second lens for viewing communication is the associative perspective. Communication from the associative perspective is about relationships. The associative perspective assumes that people are inherently connected, joined, or paired. Every entity has a corresponding pair or complement; such as night and day, male and female, good and evil. These pairs are not so much opposites, because they are not separate opposing entities, but rather, complements because they are conjoined and complete the other. In communication, sender and receivers represent a similar conjoined pair. One needs a listener to understand what the speaker communicated. Thus, when people "communicate" they are presumed to be in a relationship. The communication weight is not on the message or individual participants or attributes of the participants but on the relationship. It is the nature of that relationship that defines the communication. The figure below adapted from a diagram created by Yoshio Nakano (1999) illustrates different views of relationships between Japanese and U.S. managers. The shaded areas represent the different communication weights, which falls on the message in the assertive view and the relationship in the associative view.

Figure 2. Assertive & Associative Communication Focus



| Assertive | Associative |
| Entities Separate | Entities Connected |
| Message central | Relation central |
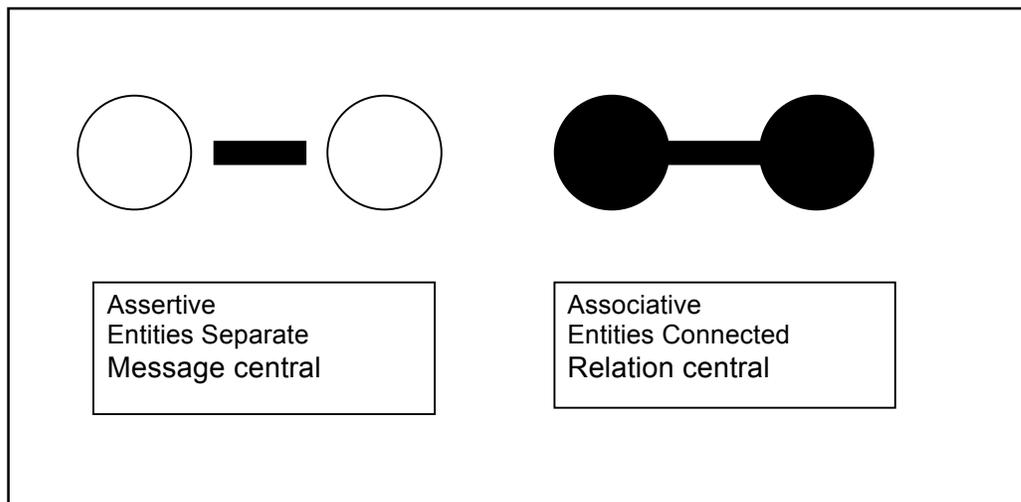
Intercultural communication scholar Muneo Jay Yushikawa (1987) used the infinity symbol to propose what he called a "double-swing model" as a 'dialogical mode' of intercultural encounters. As he explains, if one sees the two circles as two entities, while they are "separate and independent, they are simultaneously interdependent … the emphasis is on wholeness, mutuality, and the dynamic meeting .. even in their union, each maintains a separate identity" (p. 132). Yushikawa's explanation of the symbolism of infinity symbols reflects not just intercultural communication, but communication in general from the associative perspective.

Figure 3.  Infinity Sign



From the associative perspective, communication problems are expressed as relationship problems.  The focus is not on any cognitive understanding of the information exchanged.  In fact, the parties may contend that they understand each other very well.  The problem is not lack of information, but the relationship itself which provides the context or overarching prism for interpreting information.  From the associative perspective information cannot solve what is perceived as a relationship problem.  To solve the communication problem one needs to solve the communication problem, either by re-defining, mending, or strengthening the relations.  One could attempt such a communication solution through symbolic gestures.  However, again, because of the inter-related nature of all things, a more advantageous solution is finding a mediator to introduce a new relational dynamic.

From the assertive perspective, it is possible to acknowledge the theoretical possibility of such a relationship; however, the phenomenon of communication is not dependent on that relationship.  Communication can be one-way, linear and impersonal.  One can deliver information; it may not be effective or appropriate, but one can communicate without acknowledging an audience or even having a relationship with it.

From the associative perspective, communication competence is not so much about "doing" or demonstrating individual competence in order to achieve a goal, but rather about "being" in relations with others.  Intercultural communication problems would tend to be viewed as strained or difficult relationships among the parties.

A third lens is the harmonious perspective.  The notion of "harmony," and even the label itself, is frequently found in communication studies by Asian scholars, particularly Gou-Ming Chen (2001, 2005).  The harmonious perspective looks at communication as the process of maintaining proper, smooth functioning social dynamics.  Communication is about maintaining balance and functional relations between multiple, diverse communication participants.  People are part of an interconnected whole.  The focus is on one's status and relational position with regard to the larger whole within the communication dynamic. The diagram below presents the harmonious perspective.

Figure 4.  Harmonious Perspective
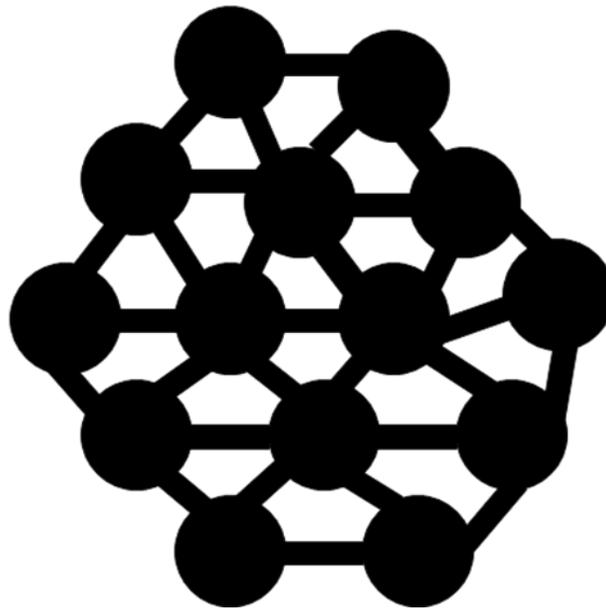


The harmonious perspective views effective communication as a multidimensional phenomenon (Chen, 2001; 2005; Leng, 2007; Li, 2009).  As they strive to maintain their status, each of the many participants also contributes to the sense of order, balance and harmony of the overall social dynamic.  A communication "problem" occurs when imbalances or disruptions occur, such as a challenge to the status of the individuals, and can have a ripple effect throughout the social dynamic. Communication "solutions" focus on mitigating status challenges and restoring balance and harmony to the larger social dynamic.

**Associative Perspective: Examples from the Arab World**

The primacy placed on relationship in societies across the Arab world suggests that the associative perspective might offer the best lens for gaining insight into how communication and communication competence takes place in the Arab world.  I used the associative lens to look for connective features and paired associations in communication.  Perhaps not surprisingly, there was a wealth of examples. A few are highlighted below.

This associative view of communication underlies the observations made by Western communication scholars and scholars within the region.  Association is an underlying feature of Hall's (1976) notion of "high-context" cultures.  Hall distinguished between high and low-context cultures based on how much meaning is embedded in the context versus the code.  Whereas low-context communicators tend to search for meaning in the code or message, high-context communicators search for meaning in the context, or setting.  The connection between meaning and context is one aspect of association.  Hall's description of the speaker-listener relationship is similarly revealing of the associative perspective:

> When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his interlocutor to know what's bothering him, so that he doesn't have to be specific.  The result is that he will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one.  Placing it properly -- this keystone -- is the role of his interlocutor.  (1976, p. 98)

Association is also inherent in the depiction of Arab cultures as "collectivist" cultures.  In collectivist societies, group goals take priority over individual ones.  Individuals pay primary attention to the needs of their group and will sacrifice personal opportunities, placing a premium on group harmony, cohesion and stability (Ting-Toomey, 1985; Triandis, 1995).  The extensive family ties and tribal groupings in Arab cultures as well as deference to group norms are cited as a major factor in classifying Arab culture as collectivist (Hofstede, 1980, 2008).

The phenomenon of association within the Arabic language is evident on several levels.  Arabic, as a Semitic language, has a three-consonant root stem.  From this root stem, a whole series of associative meaning are derived.  In English dictionaries, one looks up a word by the progressive sequence of the individual letters of the word.  For example, to find the meaning of the word "school," one would need to go sequentially "s-c-h-o-o-l."  The word "study" or "teacher," which are closely related to the idea of school, have their own distinct sequential series of individual letters and are placed separately from the word school.  For a non-native speaker of Arabic, one cannot look up a word using the

sequence of individual letters; one must first identify the three-consonant root-stem, which in turns, leads to words with associative meanings.  The root for school (madrasa) is d-r-s. This root, d-r-s (which can mean "to study"), produces a host of associated words related to study.  There is mad-ra-sa (a school, or place of study), dar-s (a lesson, something studied), dar-ras (teach, a reflexive form of studying), and so forth.

Reading written Arabic is also an associative process.  In Arabic texts, vowelling marks can be placed above and below individual letters in a word help clarify the words meaning and function.  For example, the words for 'I studied,' 'you (masculine) studied,' 'you (feminine) studied,' and 'she studied' would all be pronounced differently, but visually all of the words would look the same without the vowelling marks.  Most children's books and primary school textbooks have these vowelling marks.  Part of learning to read Arabic texts is understanding the associations among the words and inserting the vowel marks. Most adult literature, including newspapers, magazines, books and other written text do not contain these vowelling marks.  The notable exception to this practice of omitting vowel marks in texts is the Quran, which has complete vowel marks so as to avoid misreading the text.  The situation is much like how an English language reader would determine whether the word "present" means a gift, an act of offering something, or a time reference:  'At *present*, I cannot *present* him with a *present*.'  One determines the meaning of a word by its context within the sentence.  As G.M. Wickens explains to non-native speakers of Arabic studying the language:  "The *writer* of Arabic does *not* ordinarily provide the reader with *any short vowels [i.e., vowel marks] at all*: it is the *reader's* need and duty to *supply* these" (Wickens, 1980*,* p. 13, emphasis his). Wicken's observation about the writer-reader relationship parallels Hall's (1976) earlier observation about the speaker-listener relations.

This pair association of listener-speaker in oral communication and reader-writer in written communication underscores the relational imperative of the associative perspective.  Viewed from the associative lens, communication is predicated on the notion of a partner.

Classical Arabic as illustrated in the Quran is highly associative in nature.  The Quran, considered the highest literary work in the Arabic language, is replete with associative-based stylistic, linguistic and rhetorical features.  For example, the text in the Quran is not punctuated (the Quran was compiled in written form more than 1,400 years ago; punctuation is a relatively new phenomenon for Arabic texts).  The Quranic text contains no periods, semicolons, question marks, commas, or quotation marks.  One recognizes a question or statement by word cues, stylistic features and context.

The many rhetorical devices found in the Quran are also associative-based. Repetition, narrative storytelling, dialogue, and rhetorical questions are used to engage rather than simply inform the reader.  Among the most prominent devices are the wealth of metaphors, analogies and similes, which are together referred to as 'parables" or "*methal*" in Arabic.  As the Quran repeatedly states, it teaches by every parable.  An example of a parable is the "spider's house," which stands out for its elegant visual simplicity: "The likeness of those who take false deities as protectors other than Allah is like the spider who builds for itself a house; but truly the frailest of houses is the spider's house – if they but knew" (Quran 29:41).

One also sees association in the layers of relationships discussed in the Holy Quran. The first pillar in Islam is '*at-tawheed*,' which proclaims the oneness of God, is very much a relational statement:  Nothing can be associated with God.  Within the Quran, a person's most important relationship is with God.  Man's relationship to God is presented as a higher or more intimate level of relations than his relationship to himself. Man's relationship to himself, what might be called intra-personal communication, is a second level of relationships.  A third level of relationships discussed in the Quran deals with intimate relations such as one's parents, siblings, spouse, children and neighbors. Social manners and knowledge of appropriate behaviors is one of the three fundamental tenets of the Islamic conception of education (Kirdar, 2006).  The most expansive relationship is man's relationship within "*al-Ummah*," or the community of Islam.  In his commentary on the Quran, Yusuf Ali (1934/2003) points out that the overwhelming focus (first 14 of 15 parts) of the Quran is on *Ummah*.

**Associative Perspective: Relational Communication**

The term "intercultural competence" is frequently used to describe effective and appropriate communication in the intercultural setting.  The word "competence" ideally captures the importance of "doing," as well as attributes that an individual may employ to successfully achieve a desired communication outcome.  While the term "competence" may be well suited for the assertive perspective, it may be less so for the associative perspective.

From the associative perspective, which stresses a relational "being" as well as the focus on the relational dynamics among the parties, the equivalent of "communication competence" is perhaps "relational communication."  Relational communication is a way of being and interacting with others that gives primacy to the relational dynamics of the communication participants and situation.  The term seeks to convey a sense of valuing relationships, of maintaining a constant state of awareness of being embedded in a

social and relational dynamic, of being alert to relational cues and dynamics, and having a personal disposition or talent of defining and navigating within and among relational dynamics across a wide social sphere.

The associative perspective assumes that individuals are inherently connected, that by being human, they are embedded in relationships with others. Communication is about being within and navigating among relationships with others. One does not have to "create," "build," or assert one's self in order to be in a relationship (Miyahara, 2006). If anything, it is the larger relationship dynamics (history, forces, norms, obligations, etc.) that manage or influence the individual parties.

From the assertive perspective, relational communication may appear to be a set of individual attributes or skills that one uses to influence others and the communication process or to manage relationships. LeBaron's (2003) speaks of the various features and skills in intercultural conflict settings as "relational adeptness." However, relationship management or adeptness puts the individual in charge in the management *of* others. Relational communication is about a way of personally being in relationship *with* others. In this sense, relational communication is not activity-based or goal-oriented. Strong, positive relationships are not a means to achieve another communication goal, but are viewed as an end goal itself. Relational communication gives primacy to the relationship itself, not the results or outcomes of a relationship.

There are numerous examples of relational communication in operation in the Arab context. One is to observe the use of regional dialects. As mentioned earlier, there is a wide variation in spoken Arabic, such as Moroccan or Egyptian Arabic. Relational communication would mean recognizing these variations and 'code-switching' to strengthen a relational bond or gain in-group status.

Another example of relational communication is manifest in the wealth and extensive use of social greetings. Western observers have long noted the abundance of social greetings and ritualized responses as a dominant feature of the region (Adelman & Lustig, 1981; Cohen, 1987; Dean & Popp, 1990; Yousef, 1974). The Holy Quran states, "When you are greeted with a greeting, greet in return with what is better than it, or (at least) equal to it. Allah takes into careful account all things" (Sura an-Nisaa' 4:86). The importance of greetings relates to their use as social lubricants in relational dynamics.

Eloquence, a prized feature in the Arab world (Chejne, 1965; Hamod, 1963; Shouby, 1951) is other example of relational communication. The essence of eloquence is not mastery of the language per se (competence), but rather the ability to use language to emotionally connect and move others. The ability to use language in a relational sense

to connect with others, as opposed to a sense of individual competence helps explain why some visitors with limited linguistic abilities fair much better than others who are fluent. Intercultural competence, as it is currently conceived, tends to focus attention on mastering the language or gaining linguistic fluency. Relational communication is about learning the social cues and relational dynamics (many of which may be nonverbal) and gaining a degree of social fluency.

## IMPLICATIONS

The differences between the assertive perspective and its assumption of "intercultural competence" and the associative perspective and its assumption of "relational communication" have important implications for international education. The distinctive focus may also help explain differences in teaching and learning styles (Merriam, 2007; Reagan, 1996).

Teaching, from the assertive perspective, tends to emphasize the content, course material as well as transferring the information from one separate individual (the teacher) to another individual (the student). An unskilled teacher may simply focus on presenting the information, efficiently and skillfully meeting the information goals outlined in the course plan. A skilled teacher looks at the most effective and appropriate way to impart that information so that it resonates with the student. Yet for both, imparting information by the teacher and retention of information by students is the focus.

From the associative perspective, the defining feature of the educational experience is the relational dynamic, specifically teacher-student relationship and classroom dynamic. A strong or positive relational dynamic provides the foundation for constructive and productive learning. The primacy of relational communication for teachers means recognizing the importance of relationships and relational dynamics in the classroom. Concretely, the primacy of relational communication may mean that the instructor may need to detour from the lesson plan or even put the plan aside completely to focus on the relational dynamics. A skilled teacher may develop lessons that incorporate a relational focus.

Teachers may need to explicitly discuss different relational definitions and expectations in the student-teacher relationship. The ambiguity of the intercultural setting combined with the heightened emphasis on the teacher-student relationship is a recipe for student stress and anxiety. A student with an associative perspective may try desperately to read the relational cues of the teacher and develop a set of expectations that the

student thinks the teacher may have.  Meeting those expectations or "pleasing the teacher" is important for student-teacher relations.  Because of cultural differences, the student often misreads the teacher.  Or, even more disheartening, the teacher may misread the student's desire for relational definitions and rebuff the student's effort to "please the teacher."

A teacher can greatly facilitate a student's adjustment by paying attention to relational cues and discussing potentially unclear or culturally discrepant cues.  For example, how the teacher prefers to be addressed, whether "Mr. Miller" or "Bob," indicates the teacher's awareness of relational dynamics and provides students who are relationally focused with valuable cues for navigating the new social terrain.  The teacher may explicitly follow up with discussions of other relational cues that help clarify relational definitions and expectations.  For example, Bob may have to explain his rather informal, free-for-all discussion format, as against his rather strict expectations about punctuality.  Mr. Miller may discuss his favorite teacher from high school, who on the surface was quite rigid but who enjoyed meeting students after class at his favorite coffee shop.  Mr. Miller may explain how he also adopted this rigid/relaxed style and how students shouldn't confuse between his demeanor in and outside of class.  In much the same way, teachers may encourage students to meet regularly to discuss course material as well as to to learn relational expectations.

The emphasis on relations has implications for orientation programs.  Traditionally orientation programs have focused on providing information, which is again information transfer from one entity (the university) to another (the foreign student).  From the assertive perspective, individuals are assumed to be separate and relationships are a matter of choice and one must initiate or assert oneself into the relationship process.  This assumption underlies the many activities and forums to introduce students to each other in orientation programs.  Orientation programs often provide numerous activities and forums for individuals to initiate relations with others.  What may not occur to the orientation planners is that the very notion of having to initiate or individually assert oneself into a relationship is a foreign idea.  For this reason, the students may enjoy the activity but walk away without making any "friends" or, more specifically, initiating relationships with others.  Instead, the students may gravitate toward relations that appear familiar or pre-defined such as those with a cultural or geographic affinity.  Students with a predominant assertive perspective may face special challenges in a region where the associative perspective is dominant.  From the assertive view, individuals are inherently separate.  Communication is the process or mechanism that enables the individual to link with others.  Each individual entity can decide the number and nature of relations with others.  Relationships are a matter of individual choice rather than a social given or state of being.  Once in a relationship, individuals perceive

that they have the ability to influence the nature of the relationship.  In fact, individuals tend to believe that they have greater ability to influence the relationship than to be influenced by the relationship.  Being "forced" into a relationship is not viewed positively and the individual may not feel bound by relationship demands or obligations.  Because relationship are  primarily a matter of choice and maintaining positive relations a matter of ability, individuals may believe that they can simply sever relations with others and be done with it.  From an associative perspective, severing relations is not that easy or simple.  All of these different assumptions about relationships can cause students to feel that, for example, their study-abroad experience is bogged down with seemingly endless and confusing "relationship problems."  The others are "thin skinned," "overly sensitive," or "too demanding." The relations are "complex," burdened with demands or "pressures," or even "fantasies," particularly relations with the opposite sex.


## CONCLUSION

In recognizing the growing importance of relationships in intercultural competence, Deardorff called "for more focus on the relationships and on all interactants, beyond the individual" (2009b, p. 265).  Several scholars have started making headway on this challenge.  Chen's (2001, 2005) harmony model of communication or Miike's (2002, 2003) communication concept of "amae" both implicitly have relationships at their core. Nwosu (2009) speaks of "communialism," as a cornerstone of African communication. Manian and Naidu (2009) put "intercultural cooperation" as the DNA of India communication, a view that was echoed by Sinha, J., Sinha, T.N., Verma, and Sinha, R.B.N. (2001) and Sinha and Kanungo (1997).

This paper has sought to contribute to relationally-based discussions of intercultural communication by providing three perspectives of communication based on the relations among the interactants:  assertive, associative and harmonious.   Some of the features and descriptions of the three lenses are very preliminary, more like a water color than an oil painting.  This paper focused on sketching contours of an associative perspective of communication and relational communication which appears dominant among the peoples in the Arab world.  Viewed from the associative perspective, relationships are not a tool for facilitating communication between two people or gaining intercultural "competence," but the central core for understanding the process of communication itself.


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