



# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

For Students in the Faculty of  
Economics and Commerce

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### **Some Intercultural Blunders**

Coca-Cola wanted Chinese characters for a phonetic equivalent of Coca-Cola, so it chose Ke Kou Ke La, which translates as 'bite the wax tadpole' or 'female horse stuffed with wax' depending on the dialect.

In Taiwan, the translation of the Pepsi slogan 'Come alive with the Pepsi generation' was translated as 'Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead.'

In a Bucharest hotel lobby: 'The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable.'

On a menu of a Swiss restaurant: 'Our wines leave you nothing to hope for.'

At a Hong Kong dentists: 'Teeth extracted by the latest Methodists'

In a Greek tailors: 'Order your summer suit. Because is big rush we will execute customers in strict rotation.'

In a Copenhagen airline office: 'We take you bags and send them in all directions.'

In a Acapulco hotel: 'The manager has personally passed all the water served here.'

(Source: Jandt, 2001, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction*)

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# 1. Intercultural Communication

Human beings have a great desire to be with people who are similar to themselves. This is because they share the same ways of doing things, the same values and operate by similar rules. When we are with people who are similar to ourselves, the ways we have of doing things just seem like common sense. However, sometimes work or study or a sense of adventure take us out of our comfort zone. When this happens we realize that the things we took for granted about human interaction are not necessarily the same for everyone. This can be a very difficult, even shocking experience. This booklet explains what happens when people step out of their comfort zone by experiencing other cultures, either by travelling to another country or by being in contact with people from other cultures who are in your home country. It explains how we react, why we react the way we do and how to make the interaction between people from other cultures a positive experience.



## Perspectives

Mei Ling is a student in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. When she thought about people in her home town she remembered that she had noticed that in Kuala Lumpur the expatriate community tended to stick together. They lived near each other and socialised with each other. Most of the expats did not spend time with Malaysians or make close friends except with other Australians or Americans.

Adam is a local student in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. He thought about the overseas students who had been at his school. They all hung around together, made friends with each other and didn't seem to make much effort to mix with the Australian students.

## 1.1 What is Culture?

Culture can be defined as human creation (Freire, 1970). It is the human part of the environment (Wang, Brislin, Wang, Williams, & Chao, 2000). In other words, culture is the non-biological aspects of life. It is the process of generating and sharing meaning within a social system. This social system is comprised of values, norms and ways of behaving and so culture comprises the ways we interact, behave, and communicate with one another. Culture is something that is learned from parents, schools the media and the broader community. Singer (1998) defined culture as:

a pattern of learned, group-related perceptions – including both verbal and nonverbal language, attitudes, values, belief systems, disbelief systems and behaviours that is accepted and expected by an identity group (Singer, 1998:5)

Yet cultures are not fixed. They are changing and interconnected although change may be slow or irregular. Cultures are dynamic as they are created and recreated through shared interactions (Gudykunst, 1983). However, these changes may be slow or irregular.

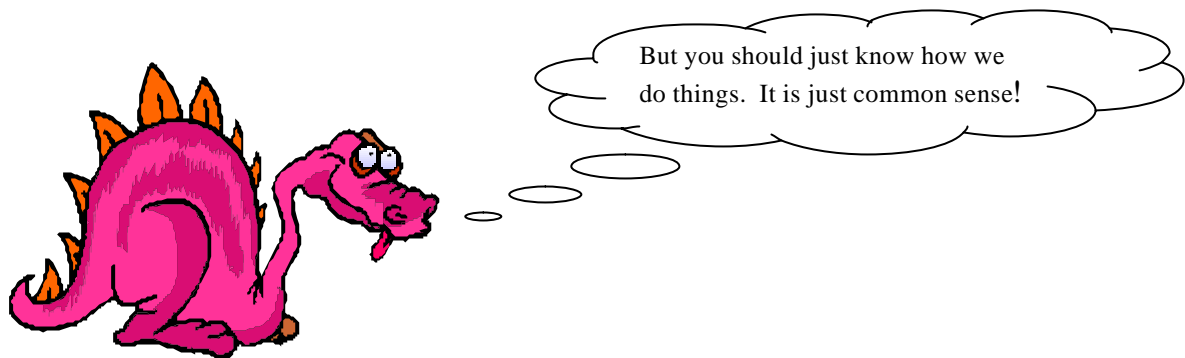
The important thing to remember about culture is that while it may be fundamental, it is not innate. Yet it often not discussed, analysed or critiqued but is seen as being 'common sense'. Culture is made up of the shared values and assumptions of a particular group of people. Because these values and assumptions are shared, it is easy to take them for granted and believe that they are 'normal'. In this way it is possible for people to believe that the ways in which they behave and the things they value are right and true for everyone. As Paige, (1993) has pointed out, cultures have an internal logic and coherence and hence their own validity.

However, in order to facilitate communication between cultures it is necessary to understand human reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckman 1967 cited in Paige 1993). If we can understand that then we can begin to understand that different groups may have different values, different way of communicating, different customs, conventions and assumptions. While these may conflict with our own understandings and assumptions it does not necessarily mean that they are inferior, 'wrong' or 'rude'.

Wang et al., (2000:1-3) identify the essential features of culture. They are:

- Culture is the human made part of the environment.
- Culture reflects widely shared assumptions about life.
- Culture is so fundamental that most people do not and cannot discuss or analyse it.
- Culture becomes evident when someone encounters someone from another country who deviates from their own cultural norms.
- Culture is transmitted from generation to generation
- Even in new situations, people can make a judgement about what is expected in their own culture.
- Cultural values endure and change takes place over a number of generations.
- Violations of cultural norms have an emotional impact
- It is relatively easy (although not necessarily helpful) to make generalisations about cultural differences.

These key features are useful when we consider communication between cultures.



## 1.2 What is Intercultural Communication?

Today the world we live in is “a global village” where no nation, group or culture can remain anonymous (Samovar & Porter, 1991). What happens in one part of the world affects all parts of the world. As the world is becoming smaller, we are increasingly interacting with people from many different cultures. While modern technology has made it easier for us to communicate with people anywhere in the world, such interactions can be difficult if we do not know how to deal with people and cultures different from our own. Here are examples of some of the obvious mistakes politicians and businesses have made when it comes to dealing with other languages cultures:

- In Germany, a Berliner is a jelly donut. In his speech at the Berlin Wall, President Kennedy, when he said “Heute, ich bin ein Berliner” actually said “Today, I am a jelly donut” when he really meant “Today, I am Berliner (a native of West Berlin)
- In China, KFC’s “finger-licking good” was translated as “eat your fingers off”.
- Chevrolet attempted unsuccessfully to market its Nova compact car in Latin American countries. In Spanish, *no va* means “does not go” or “it doesn’t run”.
- In Australia, President Bush flashed a backhanded peace sign in motorcades. Many in Australia interpret that gesture as obscene.

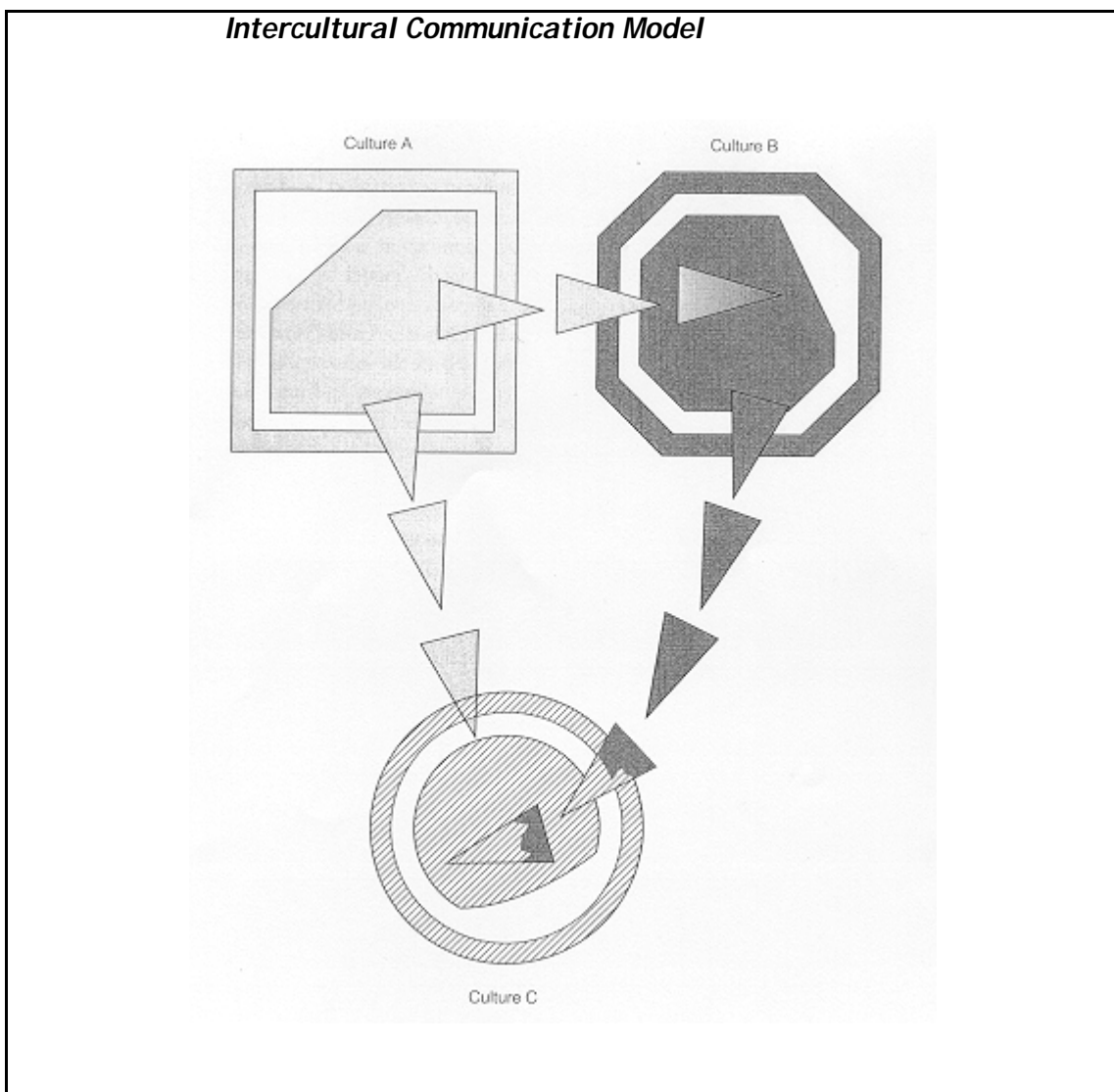
(Source: Jandt, 2001, *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction*)

These language and cultural mistakes can clearly be avoided if we increase our knowledge and understanding of other people and their cultures. The study of intercultural communication addresses this need by examining the communication and interactions between people of different cultures or subcultures. Fundamental to intercultural communication is the belief that it is through culture that people learn to communicate. A Chinese, an Egyptian, or an Australian, for example, learns to communicate like other Chinese, Egyptians, or Australians. Their behavior conveys

meaning because it is learned and shared. In other words, it is cultural. Thus, the ways in which people communicate, their language patterns, style, and nonverbal behaviors are all culturally determined (Klopf & Park, 1982).

Samovar & Porter (1997) point out that as cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviours of people will inevitably vary as a result of their different perceptions of the world. Intercultural communication, more precisely then, is defined as the study of communication between people whose “cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough” to alter their communication (Samovar and Porter, 1997: 70). In their model of intercultural communication, Samovar and Porter (1997) illustrate the process of how the meaning of a message changes when it is encoded by a person in one culture and decoded by a person in another culture in the context of his or her own cultural background. In some cases, the message may be interpreted to carry a different meaning than was intended.

Figure 1



(Source: Samovar and Porter, 1997)

In Figure 1 A, B and C represents three different cultures. Cultures A and B are similar to one another while culture C is quite different. Within each culture is another form similar to the shape of the influencing parent culture. This represents the person who has been molded by his/her culture. However, the shape of the person is somewhat different from that the parent culture since we are all shaped by our culture, but are also influenced by other factors as well (e.g. age, gender, class, race, etc.). Also, within any culture there is internal variation.

The series of arrows connecting the figures represents the production, transmission, and interpretation of messages across cultures. When a message leaves culture A, for example, it carries the content of the message as it is intended. When it reaches culture B, the message changes because the new culture influences how the message is interpreted and hence its meaning. Also, the greater the differences between the cultures, the more likely the message will be changed.

For example, the change that occurs between cultures A and B is much less than the change between cultures B and C. This is because there is greater similarity between cultures A and B and the message is interpreted more nearly like it was originally intended. Culture C, on the other hand, is quite different from cultures A and B and the message is interrupted differently there and becomes more like the pattern of culture C.

Samovar and Porter's model shows the possibility of misunderstandings that always exist in intercultural communication, especially if there is great variation in cultural differences. As their model illustrates, the amount of influence a culture has on communication between cultures clearly depends on the similarity of the cultures. The more the cultures are alike, the less influence culture will have on communication. For example, in intercultural communication situations involving Americans and Canadians, culture would not have a strong impact as the two cultures have much in common (e.g. language, geography, religion, political system, etc.). On the other hand, we can expect culture to have great impact when a German communicates with a Chinese as the two cultures differ greatly (e.g. physical appearance, language, religion, concept of self, etc.)

When communicating with someone from a different culture, we can therefore expect cultural differences to have an influence. Cultural differences stem from our differing perceptions, which in turn determines how we communicate with people of other cultures. By understanding how people perceive the world, their values and beliefs, we can better understand what they say and can anticipate potential cross-cultural misunderstandings. Let's now look more closely at what we mean by perceptions, beliefs and values in the intercultural context.

### **1.2.1 Perception**

Perception is defined as “the internal process by which we select, organize and interpret information” from the outside world (Klopf & Park, 1982:26). In other words, our perceptions of the world are what we tend to notice, reflect upon and respond to in our environment that are meaningful and significant to us. As a result, no two of us perceive our surroundings in exactly the same way. This is especially the case if we interact with people who come from cultures very different from our own. The way in which each one of us perceives the world is learned and is part of our cultural experience. Whether it be the judgment we make of a certain kind of food or the responses we have to going to see the doctor, we all react to these different events in the way that our culture has taught. Our perceptions are culturally determined and in turn influence the way we communicate with others.

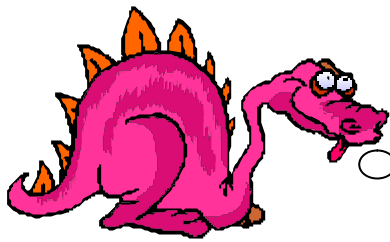
### **1.2.2 Beliefs**

Beliefs are the judgments we make about what is true or probable. They are usually linked to objects or events that possess certain characteristics that we believe to be true with or without proof (Samovar & Porter, 1997). For example, we have beliefs about religion (there is a God), events (the meeting was successful), other people (she is friendly) or even about ourselves (I am hard-working). According to Price (2000), most of our beliefs are ideas about how things work, why things are the way they are, and where things come from. Many of our beliefs are also concerned with providing an explanation for things which would otherwise be unpredictable or inexplicable, such as the weather, death and romance. Like our perception, our beliefs are determined by our cultural backgrounds and experiences. We are taught very early on what to believe based on what our culture considers worthy and true. Subsequently, our belief systems form the basis of our values, which determine in large measure how we behave and relate to others.

### **1.2.3 Values**

Values are defined as “an enduring set of beliefs that serve to guide or direct our behaviour” (Klopf & Park, 1982). They represent the norms of a culture and specify, for instance, what is good or bad, right or wrong, rude or polite, appropriate or inappropriate. In other words, they provide us with a set of rules for behaving, making choices and reducing uncertainty. Like our perceptions and beliefs, values are learned and hence subject to interpretation. When we interpret behaviour, an object, or an event, we are applying value judgments, which reflect our particular culture.

For instance, an English person who values personal space very highly may consider it rude when a Mexican stands too close. A Japanese who values conformity may find it inappropriate when an American expresses too much of his or her own opinions. The relative importance of values within each culture can also be revealed through sayings, such as “Time is money” (American), “A zebra does not despise its stripes” (African) or “No need to know the person, only the family” (Chinese). Such sayings impart values that are important in each culture and can provide us with a better understanding of others’ cultural beliefs.

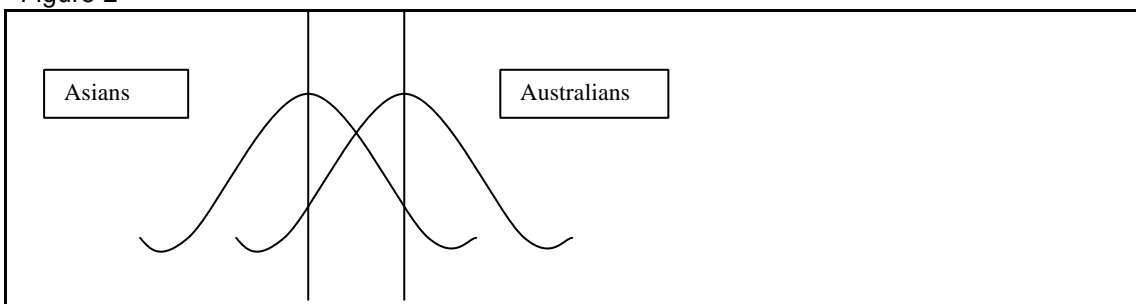


I had to do some group work in International Accounting with an Australian guy. He was really rude. He told me in front of the others that I was too pushy and that he didn't really care what mark we got, he just wanted to pass. He just wasn't prepared to work. I felt so upset. Do you think Australians are a bit lazy?

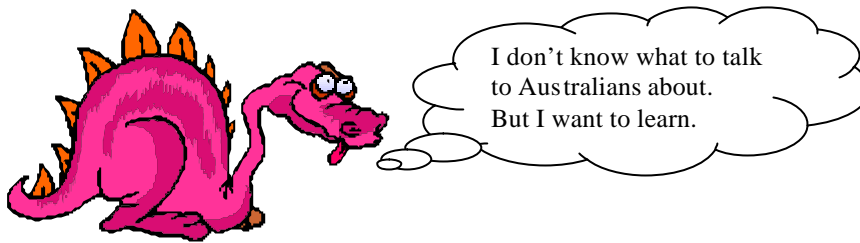
One of the criticisms of discussions of intercultural communication is that it can be said to generalise about cultures. However, our aim is not to oversimplify, or to claim that 'Asian students are like this' and 'Australian students are like that'. The idea that there is such a thing as an 'Asian student' is clearly an over generalisation as Asia is a vast area, comprising many nations. Even the idea of a 'Chinese' student is a difficult one. Do we mean only mainland China? Clearly not. Do we mean Chinese speaking? Not necessarily. The notion of an 'Australian' is also a difficult one as this is a new country comprised of the original inhabitants, the Aborigines, the white colonists and more recent migrants from a wide range of backgrounds.

When thinking about communication between cultures, rather than thinking of them as entirely separate and static it is more useful to consider them as dynamic and interconnected. However, it is also important to consider that for particular characteristics (for example individualist/collectivist), while individuals in each culture will be found across the spectrum, in any one culture people will be clustered around a certain point. Although people are clustered around a certain point, there is also an area of overlap where they may share some similarities.

Figure 2

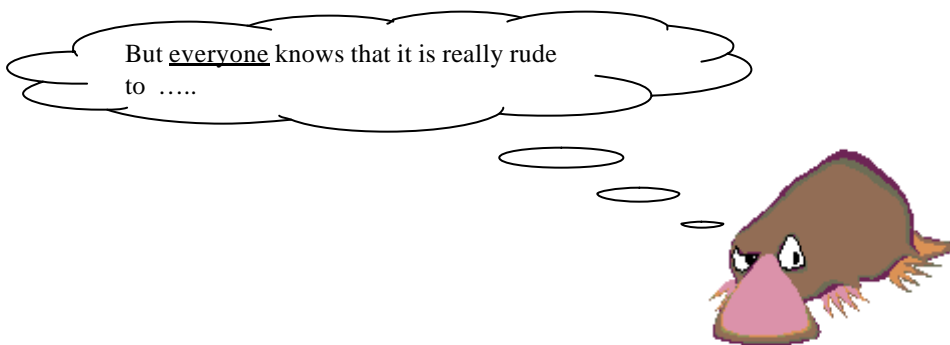


## 1.3 Barriers to Intercultural Communication



### 1.3.1 Ethnocentrism

It is quite normal to have the values of the community in which you were brought up. These are the ways in which you live your life and interact with others. They are the things you take for granted. It is not 'bad' to have Anglo Saxon Australian values or to have Hong Kong Chinese values. What is important is an understanding that your way of doing things may not be they same as everyone else's.



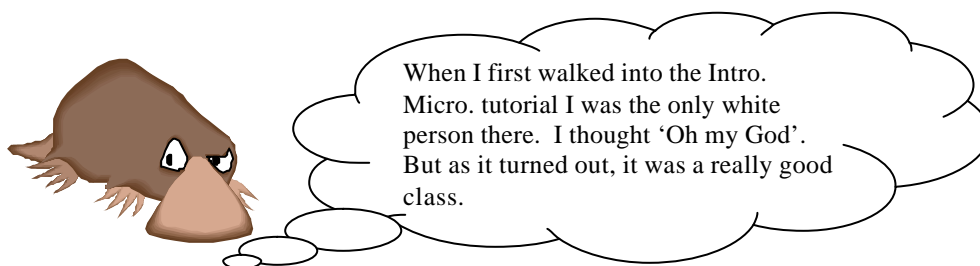
Ethnocentrism is a belief in the centrality of one's own culture. It often involves judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own. Bennett (1993:30) defines ethnocentrism as 'assuming that the worldview of one's own culture is central to all reality'. Said (1978) has described the ways in which the West has polarised East and West so that the West possesses positive characteristics (strength, activity, reliability) whereas the East is depicted as having opposing characteristics (fragility, passivity, wily unreliability). Bennett (1993) has proposed a developmental sequence towards intercultural sensitivity. His model outlines the stages which people go through when faced with the difficulties of intercultural contact. He refers to the first three stages as the ethnocentric stages of denial, defence and minimization.

#### ***Bennett's (1993) Model***

- The first stage is one of denial, in which a person confronted with cultural difference avoids or denies the existence of any difference. This can happen in two ways, through isolation or separation. Isolation occurs if a population

is both physically separated and homogenous. In such cases, it is possible to deny the existence of any cultural differences or consider them unimportant in one's own world. Separation is the intentional construction of barriers that create distance between cultures. This separation facilitates denial. Bennett points out that one of the dangers of separation is that another culture becomes seen as less than human. An extreme example of separation is the apartheid system in South Africa, however there are many examples of a 'compound' mentality in which people physically separate themselves from those they consider different in order to maintain their own denial.

- In Bennett's model, the second stage of ethnocentrism is defence. This strategy occurs as a way to counter the impact of cultural differences which are perceived as threatening. A person does this as a way of maintaining the integrity of their own worldview. The defence stage has three forms; denigration, superiority and reversal. Denigration or negative stereotyping involves attributing undesirable characteristics to everyone in a particular cultural category. The Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan are extreme versions of this form of defence but there are countless other examples of negative stereotyping. Superiority is another form of defence. It is a positive evaluation of one's own culture which does not necessarily involve denigrating others. The example that Bennett gives is that of modernisation, which tends to assume Western superiority and assumes that the aim of all developing nations is to follow the Western model. The third form of defence is reversal, which is the flip-side of superiority. It is the denigration of one's own culture and an assertion of the superiority of the other.
- Minimization is the third stage of ethnocentrism. In this stage, people will seek to hide difference under cultural similarities. Part of minimization is an assumption of universal characteristics shared by all humanity. However this assumption is usually made by the dominant culture. Bennett suggests that people tend to use their own worldview to interpret other's behaviour and that the idea of a 'universal truth' is usually based on one's own values.



### 1.3.2 Stereotypes

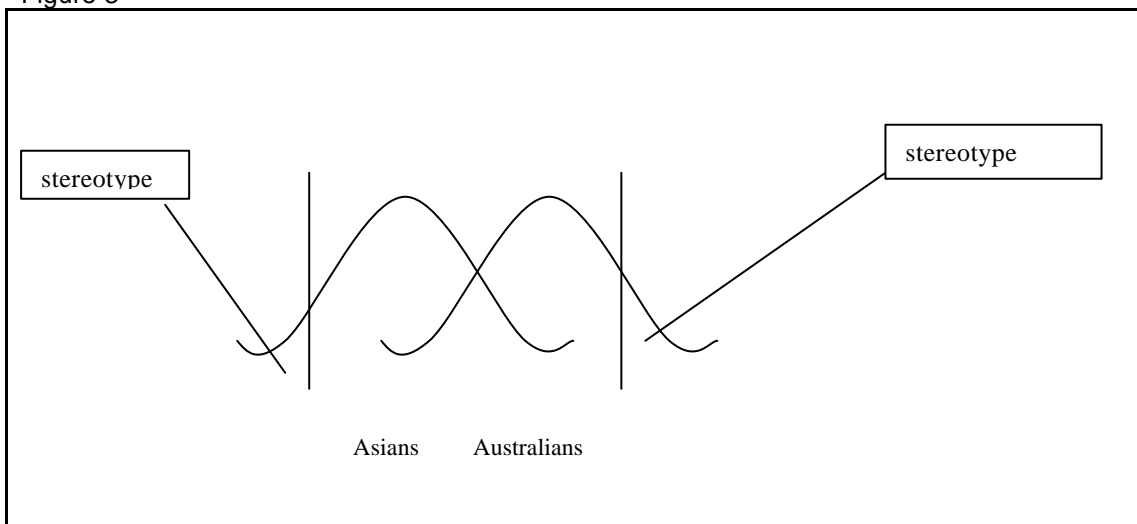
As an extension of ethnocentrism, stereotypes are one of the obvious barriers to intercultural communication. Samovar & Porter (1991:280) define stereotypes as "the perceptions or beliefs we hold about groups or individuals based on our previously formed opinions or attitudes". As the definition suggests, stereotypes do not develop suddenly but are formed over a period of time by our culture. They are made up of bits and pieces of information that we store and use to "make sense" of what goes on around us. Stereotypes can be either positive or negative and as (Barna, 1997) points out they help us to "make sense" of the world by categorizing and classifying people

and situations we encounter. We may revert to stereotyping, for example, when we are overseas and are faced with people and situations we are not accustomed to. While stereotyping may reduce the threat of the unknown, it interferes with our perceptions and understanding of the world, when applied to individuals or groups. Often stereotypes are problematic because they are oversimplified, overgeneralized and/or exaggerated. Statements such as “Blacks are...”, “Athletes are not...”, or “Women should...” are stereotypes because their content are beliefs based on half-truths or distortions about a group of people.

Jandt, (2001) identified a number of ways in which stereotypes are harmful and impede communication. First, stereotypes can cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true, when it may not be. Second, the continual use of stereotypes reinforces our beliefs and can also cause us to assume a widely held belief is true of any one individual in the group. If a group is stereotyped as dishonest, for example, we tend to apply that stereotype to all members of that group, regardless of individual differences. Third, when we use negative stereotypes to interpret the behaviour of individuals within a group, this further impedes intercultural communication by reinforcing those negative stereotypes. Such negative stereotyping can become a “self-fulfilling prophecy” for those who are stereotyped and hence place them at risk. An example of this would be the prevalent stereotype that women are not good at math and science, which in turn may cause women to internalise such beliefs and avoid studying or pursuing maths or science related professions.

Figure 3 below shows what happens when people develop stereotypes. Although people are spread across a broad spectrum stereotypes tend to pick up extremes which, although they may be present in the group of people in question, are not necessarily representative.

Figure 3



## **Examples of Stereotyping**

### **Adam's View**

Adam is assigned to work on a group project in Principles of Marketing with Mei Ling, a Chinese student in his class. Adam has never spoken to Mei Ling before although he assumes that she would be very quiet and reserved like other Asian students and that her English would not be very good. Adam also thought that Mei Ling probably still lives at home with her parents and when she is at the university she is always studying diligently at the library. Adam has heard that Asian students are very studious, hard-working, and most are good at maths and science. In class Adam observes that Mei Ling tends to be very quiet and rarely participates in discussions. Outside of class he assumes that she spends most of her time with her Asian friends and does not seem to make much effort to get to know Australians.

While some stereotypes may have some grains of truth to them, they are over simplistic and do not present an accurate picture of any individual or group. Our stereotype of Mei Ling, for instance, suggests that she is non-English speaking, lives at home with her parents, is studious, good at math and science, is quiet, does not participate in class, and associates only with other Asian students. Now, let's take a closer look at some of these stereotypes and how they may be limited. First, it is important to reexamine the stereotype that all Asian students are alike. Students with Asian backgrounds, and particularly being ethnic Chinese, can come from a number of countries, such as Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and China. Some are born or have lived in Australia all of their lives while others are from overseas.

The stereotype that Mei Ling lives at home with her parents therefore may not be the case if she is an international student. She may live alone or with relatives or live in shared accommodation with other students. Furthermore, the diverse backgrounds that Mei Ling can come from make it difficult to assume her level of English fluency. While some Asian students may struggle with English, all international students at the university of Melbourne must have a high level of competence in English in order to be admitted to the degree. Many overseas students are very fluent in English. Students from Singapore, for example, receive most of their education in English and many consider English as their first language (Volet & Renshaw, 1996).

In addition to language issues, international students may go through some period of adjustment once in Australia. This often involves not only having to adjust to the changes from going from high school to university but also going from a familiar to an unfamiliar educational and cultural environment. This period of adjustment, particularly to the Australian educational system, may explain why some Asian students tend to be quieter in class initially. It is important however not to assume this stereotyped image for all students. In fact, (Volet & Kee, 1993) in their study of Chinese students from Singapore, found that there were no significant differences between local and Singaporean students in their level of participation in class discussions. Situations where Singaporean students reported they felt more reserved than local students were in small group tutorials when there may have been only one or two other Chinese students. Also, both local and Singaporean students reported that they felt intimidated and afraid to speak up in class when one or two local students dominated the discussions. These findings suggest that there are greater similarities than differences between local and Chinese students when it comes to class participation.

Our stereotype of Mei Ling also suggests that she is hardworking and studious. While this may be the case, it is important to recognise that most university students do have to spend a considerable amount of studying. Asian students are not necessarily more studious than any other students although it may take some international students more time to study than their Australian classmates given that English is not their first language. Noi (1990) further points out that international students are full-fee paying students, and therefore, often feel enormous pressure and obligation to their parents and families to do well in their studies. The financial aspects as well as the high cultural expectation placed on educational success are often reasons why some Asian students spend more time at their books or even choose to study subjects, such as math or science, which their parents may deem suitable.

In our portrayal of Mei Ling, we also assumed that she prefers "to stick together" with other Asian students rather than get to know more local Australian students. Even though Mei Ling may associate mostly with other Asian students, this is not to say that she would not like to get to know more local Australian students. In fact, it was found that without exception international students experienced difficulties meeting Australian students although most said they would prefer to mix more with them (James & Devlin, 2001).

## Mei Ling's View

Mei Ling has been paired up to work on an assignment in Principles of Marketing with Adam. She thinks about her picture of an Australian boy. She thinks he is probably loud and more interested in socialising (which includes drinking large quantities of alcohol) than studying. He probably spends more time in the U-bar than in front of the computer. She imagines that he spends more time playing football, watching TV and sleeping than he does in the library. He is probably rude, unfriendly and a bit rough. He speaks English as a first language and so finds study easy. He is independent and does as he pleases without considering his family. He has plenty of friends at Melbourne University, especially in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce and knows his way around Melbourne.

Now lets take Mei Ling's stereotype apart. Loudness is something that can be interpreted in a number of ways. How much and how loudly someone talks can be cultural. For Adam, the tone of his voice may be part of his idea of what it is to be a man. If he spoke too softly he may be afraid that people would think he was effeminate.

Some Australian students do spend time socialising, others work very hard. Students, often in first year find the freedom and emphasis on independent learning difficult after the structured nature of school where teachers were keeping an eye on whether they had done their work. This lack of focus can be a problem for all students, both international and local. University is a very exciting time. After years of restrictions from school and family, students at university are entering a new adult life and so take the opportunity to experiment with new things. Alcohol is part of socialising for many Australians and for most of those who choose to drink it is something that is done in moderation.

Mei Ling thinks Adam is rude, rough and unfriendly. As we discussed earlier in the sections on culture and barriers to intercultural communication, ideas about what is appropriate polite or friendly behaviour vary from culture to culture and so can be misinterpreted. Adam probably considers that his behaviour is casual and easy-going which he probably considers appropriate for contact with other students. He is also probably fairly relaxed with his tutors and even the lecturers. He is happy to call them by their first names as that is acceptable in an Australian university. He may also treat the tutors in a fairly casual way. Adam probably would not see this as rude. So while it may appear either rude or unfriendly to other people, he may be just doing what he considers the right thing

Giving opinions, questioning and critique of the ideas presented by lecturers and tutors is something that is actively encouraged in Australian universities. While challenging the tutor may be considered disrespectful in some cultures, in Australia it is interpreted as thinking critically about the material.

The stereotype of Adam suggests that he speaks English as a first language. This may not be the case. Australia is a very ethnically diverse society and many local students at this university were either born overseas or speak English as a second or other language (or both) or have parents who speak English as a second language. Even if Adam does speak English as a first language, he does not necessarily find study easy or consider it a low priority. Many Australian students are very committed to their work but some down play it in public because it is often considered more 'cool' not to be too serious about anything.

The picture of Adam also tells us that he is independent and doesn't consider his family. Family may not be as central in Australian culture in quite the same way as it may be in many Asian cultures. However that is not to say that it is not important. Adam may be given a large degree of freedom by his parents to do 'what ever makes him happy'. Or he may have parents who put pressure on him to study law or commerce because it will be good for his career. His parents may be divorced. Or they may be happily married. He may have a distant or difficult relationship with his parents, or he may have a very happy and considerate relationship. He may live with his parents or he may live away from home.

Mei Ling also assumed that because Adam is a local student that he has plenty of friends and knows his way around Melbourne. Many local students find coming to university a lonely experience. The large numbers and the way in which people are always moving from class to class means that it is difficult for Australians to make friends too. Some people know no one when they come to university. Other students come from the country and so are unfamiliar with Melbourne and life in the city. Others may come from interstate.

### 1.3.3 Prejudice

Prejudice, like stereotypes, can be either positive or negative although it is generally referred to as “the unfair, biased, or intolerant attitudes or opinions towards another person or group simply because they belong to a specific religion, race, nationality, or another group” (Samovar and Porter, 1991: 281). A person who thinks, “I don’t want (name of group) living in my neighborhood,” for example, is expressing a prejudice. Again like stereotypes, prejudice involves the preconceptions of individuals or groups based on unfounded opinions, attitudes, or beliefs. Jandt’s (2001: 75) definition of prejudice further elaborates the damaging effect of prejudice as “persons within the group are not viewed in terms of their individual merit but according to the superficial characteristics that make them part of the group”.

Prejudice can take many forms, ranging from those that are almost impossible to detect (unintentional) to those that are clearly blatant (intentional). Brislin (1988) discusses six ways in which prejudice can express itself in intercultural communication: 1) red-neck racism, 2) symbolic racism, 3) tokenism, 4) arm’s length prejudice, 5) real likes and dislikes, and 6) the familiar and unfamiliar. Red-neck racism, which Brislin (1988: 341) maintains is found all over the world, occurs when “certain people believe that members of a given cultural group are inferior according to some imagined standard and that the group members are not worthy of decent treatment”. Clear examples of this form of prejudice can be found throughout history in the treatment of indigenous groups people all over the world.

Symbolic racism, according to Brislin, is when members of one culture have negative feelings about another culture because they believe the “outside culture” is a threat to their group. For example, people may be against affirmative action programs if they believe that members of certain groups are being given preferential treatment and pose as a threat to their view of equal treatment for all. Tokenism, on the other hand, is more difficult to detect since it often involves the harboring of negative attitudes towards members of another group. Those who harbor such feelings may even go out of their way to prove that they are not prejudice by engaging in activities to include members of the out group. Brislin cites examples of this often found in the hiring practices of large organizations where women and minorities may be used as tokens to convince administrators that their hiring practices are non-discriminatory

Like tokenism, the fourth type of prejudice is also hard to detect as it often involves friendly behaviors with members of the out group on certain occasions, but these people are held at “arm’s length” in other situations where one may be expected to be more personal. An example of this form of prejudice may be seen in our interactions at a party where more impersonal topics are discussed. In this setting, we may treat others in a very friendly manner, but this may change in other settings which may require us to be more intimate. The fifth form of prejudice, real likes and dislikes, occurs when people avoid interacting with those whose behaviors they perceive as unpleasant, unhealthy and even immoral. For example, Brislin notes that as many as 50 percent of American students indicated that they would use people’s smoking habits as a reason to limit interactions with the m.

Brislin’s final type of prejudice, the familiar and unfamiliar, deals with instances when people choose to associate only with others like themselves. He cites examples of this found in most large cities around the world where people tend to seek out

interactions and live near those who are from their own cultural groups. Samovar and Porter (1991) suggest that this is because human beings tend to avoid the unknown and, hence, gravitate towards what is known and familiar. Yet, as Brislin's different types of prejudice clearly illustrate, prejudice in its milder form is nevertheless prejudice and can often lead to discrimination and racist behavior. As an extreme and intentional form of prejudice, discrimination impedes intercultural communication as it involves the "unfavorable treatment and/or denial of equal treatment of individuals or groups because of race, gender, religion, ethnicity or disability" (CCMIE, 2001).

#### 1.3.4 Language

Language is one of the most obvious barriers to intercultural communication but perhaps not the most fundamental. People who do not share a language or who feel that they have imperfect command of another person's language may have some difficulties communicating. There is also the possibility of misunderstandings occurring between people when they do not share a common language. However sharing a common language does not always guarantee understanding. Even speakers of the same language do not have exactly the same understanding of the meanings of words.

Even when cultures speak the same language they do not always understand one another. Americans and Australians, for example, use quite different vocabulary for some things and have different slang. An Australian once tried to buy a bus ticket in Texas and the driver asked her to speak English. This same Australian had a very embarrassing conversation with a Scotsman and could not understand a word he was saying. All these people had English as their first language!

Other ways in which language can be a barrier to intercultural communication are problems of vocabulary equivalence, idiomatic equivalence, experiential equivalence and conceptual equivalence (Jandt, 2001). Lack of vocabulary equivalence occurs when there are not words in one language that correspond precisely with the meaning of words in another. This occurs particularly with specific or very descriptive words. Jandt (2001:149) cites an example from Axtell (1994) of an English speaking business person who writes a letter to be translated into Japanese including the sentence 'we wonder if you would prepare an agenda for our meeting'. While 'wonder' is used in the sentence as a polite way of asking the Japanese to prepare the agenda, it can be translated into Japanese as 'doubt' and so the sentence would read 'We doubt that you would prepare an agenda for our meeting'. In this case a well-meaning sentence can inadvertently cause great offence.

Idiomatic equivalence can cause communication problems because although native speakers understand the meanings of an idiom, they can be difficult for a non-native speaker to understand and translated directly they can be either bizarre or meaningless. For example, 'the old man kicked the bucket' is meaningless unless you know that to kick the bucket means to die.

Another problem is that of experiential equivalence. Objects or experiences that do not exist in one culture are difficult to translate into the language of another culture. For example, the Chinese concept of *guanxi* has no precise English equivalent

although it does have connotations that can be expressed in English words such as relationship, connection, obligation and dependency.

Conceptual equivalence is a barrier for communication if ideas or concepts are not understood in the same ways in different cultures. Jandt (2001) gives the example of concepts such as freedom. Understandings of what is meant by the notion of 'freedom' in the United States may be different from what is meant in other countries.

### **1.3.5 Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication can be a barrier to intercultural communication. Nonverbal communication is communication without words. Messages are sent through gestures, proximity, eye contact, expectations regarding time and so on. These forms of communication can easily be misinterpreted.

Jandt (2001) identifies a number of ways in which nonverbals are used to communicate messages. The first of these is replacing spoken messages. For instance it is possible to greet someone who is a long way off by waving and a police officer can direct traffic using nonverbal communication. Another use of nonverbal communication is to send uncomfortable messages. It is possible to convey the message 'I'm in a hurry and have to go' in nonverbal ways that may be less likely to hurt someone's feelings. It is also possible to tell someone you find them attractive in nonverbal ways and so avoid some of the embarrassment that would be involved if you were to say it in words. Jandt describes making status clear as another useful function that is performed more effectively by nonverbal communication as it is less threatening. He uses the example of the US where high status is demonstrated by a more relaxed posture and lower status by more rigidity.

Turn-taking in a conversation is another form of non-verbal communication. We know when it is our turn to speak by a number of signals that are not verbal. It is very rare in a conversation for someone to actually tell us (in words) when it is our turn and how long we have to speak. However, there are signals that tell us and these signals vary between cultures.

Another use of nonverbal communication is to reinforce or modify a verbal message. It is possible to indicate something about the verbal message by a nonverbal gesture. For example, gesturing someone to come or waving as well as speaking a greeting.

Nonverbal messages can take a number of forms. Some of these are our use of personal space; gestures, facial movements and eye contact; use of time and use of touch. Other important non verbal messages can involve interpretations of the meanings of silence, clothing, the arrangement of space and furniture and so on. Because the meanings which are attached to all these things differ from one culture to another, it is possible to misread the message.

There are a number of examples of ways in which nonverbal messages can be misinterpreted. Some of these are outlined below:

- The distance that one would stand when talking to a stranger varies from culture to culture and someone breaking these unspoken rules makes us very uncomfortable.
- Gestures and eye contact can have very powerful meanings yet these meanings can vary across cultures. In some cultures, the appropriate greeting is a handshake, in others a bow, in others an embrace. Jandt refers to the circular forefinger and thumb gesture which in the US means ok. In France it can mean zero or worthless and in Brazil it is an extremely obscene gesture. Eye contact is also something that varies across cultures. Jandt cites a study which found that Arabs, Latin Americans and Southern Europeans look into the eyes of conversational partners whereas Asians and Northern Europeans only use a peripheral gaze or no gaze at all. In Australia, if no eye contact is made with someone it is assumed that the person is shy, uninterested or untrustworthy. If eye contact is too prolonged, it is interpreted as very high interest, and between males and females, as sexual interest.
- Some cultures understand time as cyclical, others view it as linear. Our use of time also varies. What a 10.30 business appointment means and whether or how long you should be kept waiting can vary from culture to culture.
- Silence has different meanings for different cultures. For some cultures, silence can indicate respect. The Chinese have a saying ‘Silence is golden ...’ In Australia, silence can often be interpreted as either shyness or lack of interest.
- Touch has different meanings in different cultures. Jandt gives an example from Thailand and Laos where it is rude for strangers to touch the top of a child’s head because the head is the home of the spirit or soul. In western countries it is very common to affectionately touch the top of a child’s head. In many countries, friends of the same sex will walk hand in hand or arm in arm. In Australia this can be seen as indicating a romantic relationship.

## 2. Studying in Australia

### 2.1 Culture Shock

Almost everyone who studies, lives or works abroad experiences some degree of difficulties in adjusting to the new culture. This response is commonly referred to as “culture shock”. Culture shock can be defined as the physical and emotional discomfort a person experience when entering a culture different from his or her own (Weaver, 1993). This period of cultural adjustment involves everything from getting used to the food and language to learning how to use the telephone, banking machines and so forth. At home, we often take many of these things we do for granted as they are automatic and require little thought. Abroad, the reverse is true and simple tasks become difficult because we don't understand or know how to behave or respond to the messages we are getting. Everything is different and the way that we are used to doing things may not be accepted as or considered as normal in our new environment.

As we are confronted with new ways of thinking, valuing, and doing things, this can cause feelings of disorientation and anxiety resulting in culture shock.

Fortunately, while culture shock is an inevitable process of cross-cultural adjustment, it is important to keep in mind that it is also manageable and can be overcome with

conscious awareness of one's own reactions. Kohls (1996) provides a conceptual model for understanding culture shock as a process of adjustment marked by four basic stages: euphoria, rejection, adjustment and adaptation. While these stages provide useful insights for understanding the experience of culture shock, it is important to note that not everyone will experience all four stages. Each stage can be ongoing or appear only at certain time. Therefore, the length and severity of each stage will also vary greatly for different individuals.

- The first stage of culture shock is one of euphoria, in which a person, the new arrival, is excited to be in a new place. Like a tourist, the newcomer is intrigued by all the new sights and sounds, new smells and tastes of his or her surroundings. He or she may have some problems, but usually accepts them as just part of the newness. At this point, it is the similarities that stand out and it seems to the newcomer that people everywhere and their way of life are very much alike. Often referred to as the "honeymoon" stage, this period of euphoria may last from a week or two to a month, but the letdown is inevitable.
- During the second stage of culture shock, known as the rejection stage, the initial excitement is over and the person starts to experience difficulties due to the differences between the new culture and the way he or she was accustomed to live. The initial curiosity and enthusiasm turn into irritation, frustration, anger, and depression. These feelings may lead the person to reject the new culture, complaining about and noticing only the things that bother them. In addition, he or she may feel homesick, bored, withdrawn, irritable as well as other distress during this period of adjustment. This stage of culture shock" is often a difficult period which may last for some time.
- Fortunately, most people gradually learn to adapt to the new culture and move into the third stage known as adjustment and reorientation. In this stage a transition occurs from the negative attitude one has during the prior stage, to a new optimistic attitude. As the newcomer begins to understand more of the new culture, he or she is able to interpret some of the subtle cultural clues and cues which passed by unnoticed earlier. Now things make more sense and the culture seems more familiar. As a result, the newcomer will develop the skills to solve problems and feelings of disorientation and anxiety are longer experienced as in the previous stage
- In Kohls' model, the fourth stage of culture shock is the adaptation, resolution, or acculturation. In this last stage, one has settled into the new culture and this results in a feeling of direction and self-confidence. The newcomer has accepted the food, drinks, habits and customs of the new culture and may even find themselves enjoying some of the very customs, ways of doing and saying things that had bothered them so much in the previous stages. In addition to being able to function comfortably in the new culture, the person also realizes that the new culture has good and bad things to offer and that no way is really better than another, just different.

## 2.2 Australian Culture

While this booklet is concerned with communication between all cultures, it is not possible to adequately present an overview of every culture represented in the Faculty of Economics and Commerce. Since you are studying in Australia, here is a very brief outline of some aspects of Australian culture that you may encounter.

It is very difficult to make generalisations about any culture and it is always possible to find exceptions to every generalisation. Australians at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are difficult to generalise about as it is such a diverse society. However, there are some comments that can be made about Australian values and ways of communicating that may be helpful.

Price (2001) has identified four key values in Australia. They are independence, equality, balance and privacy. These four will be discussed separately below.

### Independence

Price argues that Australians place a high value on independence and personal choice. As a result, people are expected to take responsibility for their own welfare. This means that a teacher, lecturer or course advisor will not tell you what to do but will give you a number of options and suggest you work out which one is the best in your circumstances. It also means that you are expected to take action if something goes wrong and seek out resources and support for yourself.

According to Price, Australians are also prepared to accept a range of opinions rather than believing that there is one truth. This means that it is acceptable, and in an educational setting desirable, to express your own opinion. In class and in essays, you may be expected to give a point of view and defend the reasons for that point of view and the evidence for it.

### Equality

Price comments that Australians are uncomfortable with differences in status and hence idealise the idea of treating everyone equally. An illustration of this is that most adult Australians call each other by their first names. In addition, Australians can be critical of those who are successful in their field or who claim superiority. This concern with equality means that Australians are uncomfortable taking anything too seriously, even themselves. They can have a self-deprecating, even cynical sense of humour and can even joke about things such as sex, religion or politics which are sacred or taboo in other cultures.

However, while Australians are concerned idealise equality they are still concerned with hierarchies. The ways in which hierarchies are understood is more hidden than in some other cultures. For instance the use of first names and casual dress can hide the hierarchies that are still very important.

### Balance

Australians believe that life should have a balance between work-time and leisure-time. As a consequence, some students may be critical of others who they perceive as doing nothing else but study.

## **Privacy**

Australian notions of privacy, mean that areas such as financial matters, appearance, and relationships are only discussed with close friends. While people may volunteer such information, they may resent someone actually asking them unless the friendship is firmly established. Even then it is considered very impolite to ask someone what they earn. With older people it is also rude to ask how old they are, why they are not married or why they do not have children. It is also impolite to ask how much something cost, unless there is a very good reason for asking.

### **2.2.1 Educational Background of Australian Students**

Local students at the University of Melbourne have attended either government or private secondary schools. Private schools range from the large, expensive, prestigious church-based schools to very small community schools. Government schools also range in size and specialisation.

Most Australian students complete thirteen years of schooling, seven at primary school from age five to eleven and then six at secondary school. The final certificate, which in Victoria is called the Victorian Certificate of Education or VCE is a two year certificate but it is the result of the second year (year 12 of secondary school) that determine whether one is accepted into university and which course one is accepted into.

As students move through secondary school, teachers tend to give students more independence, although they are rarely expected to be as independent or self-motivated as they are once they reach university. In class they are often encouraged to ask questions, discuss ideas and debate issues. Teachers expect students to challenge them to a certain degree and many believe they need to earn the students' respect and that respect is a mark of a good teacher rather than a right determined by the position.

### **2.2.2 The Australian Communication Style**

As part of the egalitarian ideal, Australians may have a fairly casual way of talking, although this varies of course from context to context. The slang used varies across class and age groups. Some Australians may be suspicious of a very formal way of speaking.

The Australian accent is also something that is (at least initially) very difficult for people from overseas (both English speakers and non English speakers). Because U.S. and British English are more familiar, people who come to Australia thinking they have a good command of English are often quite surprised to find that they have difficulty understanding Australian English. However, this difficulty decreases once you have become accustomed to the speech patterns.

Australian vowels tend to be fairly 'flat', the accent is nasal and to listeners who are unaccustomed to the accent, it sounds as if the words are not clearly defined. The

letter 't' in the centre of a word often becomes a 'd' sound eg butter sounds like budder. The Australian 'r' is not strong as it is in US English.

### Polite Language

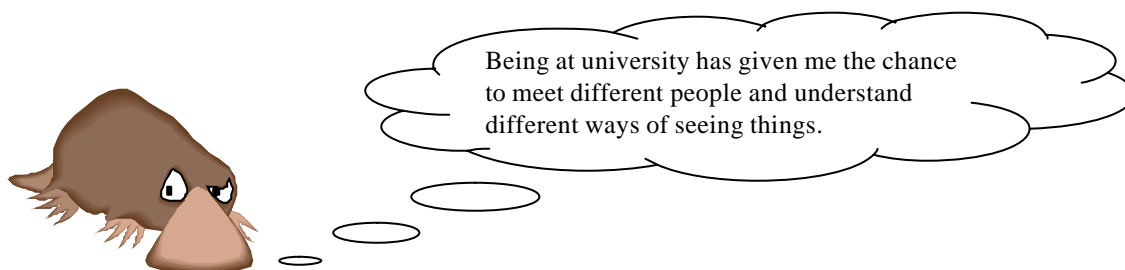
In order to be polite, Australians use 'please' and 'thank you' and these words are used commonly among friends, in shops, restaurants, taxis etc. More polite language tends to be indirect, for example 'would you mind ...?', 'I wonder if you would be able to ...', 'would it be possible to...?'. More direct requests can sound abrupt. Most Australians are uncomfortable about being called sir, madam or ma'am except on letters or in expensive hotels and restaurants.

### Turn Taking

In conversations, Australians usually take turns with almost no gap between speakers. Sometimes there is even a small overlap and this is not really rude if the first speaker had nearly finished. Silences are often considered uncomfortable and other speakers will jump in to fill the gap. Australians do not consider it disrespectful to begin speaking immediately someone else has finished. They expect their conversation partners to pick up an idea with some enthusiasm and explore it, question it or disagree and in most circumstances this is perfectly acceptable, especially among friends.

### Shortening Words

Australians have a habit of shortening just about every word over two syllables. Names are frequently shortened (e.g. Stuart becomes Stu, Katherine becomes Kath or Kate and so on). Other words are also shortened, for instance university becomes uni and tutorials are tutes.



### Australian Slang (some of it adopted from the US)

Australians tend to go in for some fairly hair-raisingly crude expressions. As with all slang, it is a good idea to listen very carefully to the context in which it is used and if possible ask a friendly local about when it is and is not appropriate before you use Australian slang. As with all colloquial expressions, it is fine used in the right context but extremely embarrassing when not used appropriately. The following are examples of some common Australian slang, with explanations of their literal meanings. Swan's *Practical English Usage* also serves as a good reference for the meanings on other slang and their degree of obscenity.

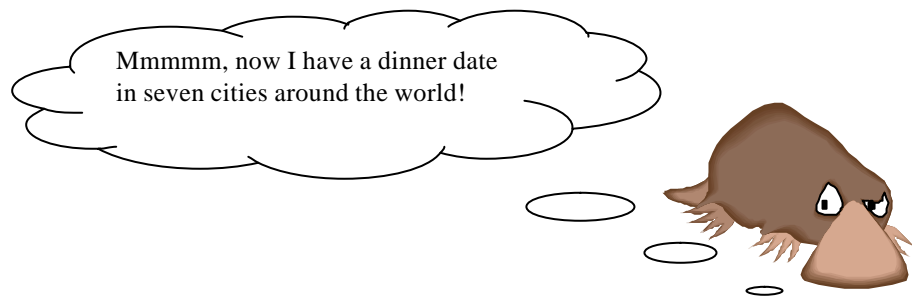
Booze	Alcohol
Bloke	Man
Cop	Police
Freebie	Something you can get for free
Mate	Friend
Wag	Miss class
Whinger	Complainer
Wuss	Someone who is weak or pathetic
Wicked	Really good
Creep	Not a very nice person, usually a bit untrustworthy
Crappy	Bad
Shirker	Someone who avoids work
Piker	Someone who avoids things (often social)
Dag	Affectionate term for someone who is not particularly fashionable or sophisticated
Mozzie	Mosquito
No worries	It's ok
Yobbo, Yob	Uncouth and aggressive
Rego	Car registration
Sheila	Woman (derogatory)
Chick	Girl (derogatory)
Ace	Fantastic
Yewy	U-turn
Veg out	Relax
Vego	Vegetarian
Chook	Chicken

A good website for more Australian slang and definitions is:  
[www.koalanet.com/australian-slang.html](http://www.koalanet.com/australian-slang.html)

### 3. So Why Bother?

There are many reasons why you may want to improve your understanding and communication with others of diverse cultural backgrounds. As we have shown throughout this booklet, the need for intercultural communication is more important today than ever before. This is true if you simply look at the diversity that is present at the university and even in your classroom. There are students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in your classes who may not share your perspectives or experiences. Understanding how to communicate with people from different cultures can therefore help expand your knowledge of the ways of others. As you learn more about other people and their cultures you will also discover more about yourself and the influence of your own culture. This will give you a greater appreciation and tolerance of diversity, which can benefit you personally in many ways. For instance, intercultural knowledge can enhance your future employability, as you will possess

the skills and flexibility to work effectively both overseas and/or with those from other cultures in your home country. As a local student, you may work for an international company in Australia, which has staff and clients from all different cultural backgrounds. As an international student, you may work overseas and need to have the ability to communicate and network effectively in a variety of settings. By taking advantages of the opportunities to interact and communicate with those from cultures different from your own, you will develop invaluable skills and understandings that will not only benefit you personally but also enhance your future careers.



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