

# *INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: HOW TO DEAL WITH*

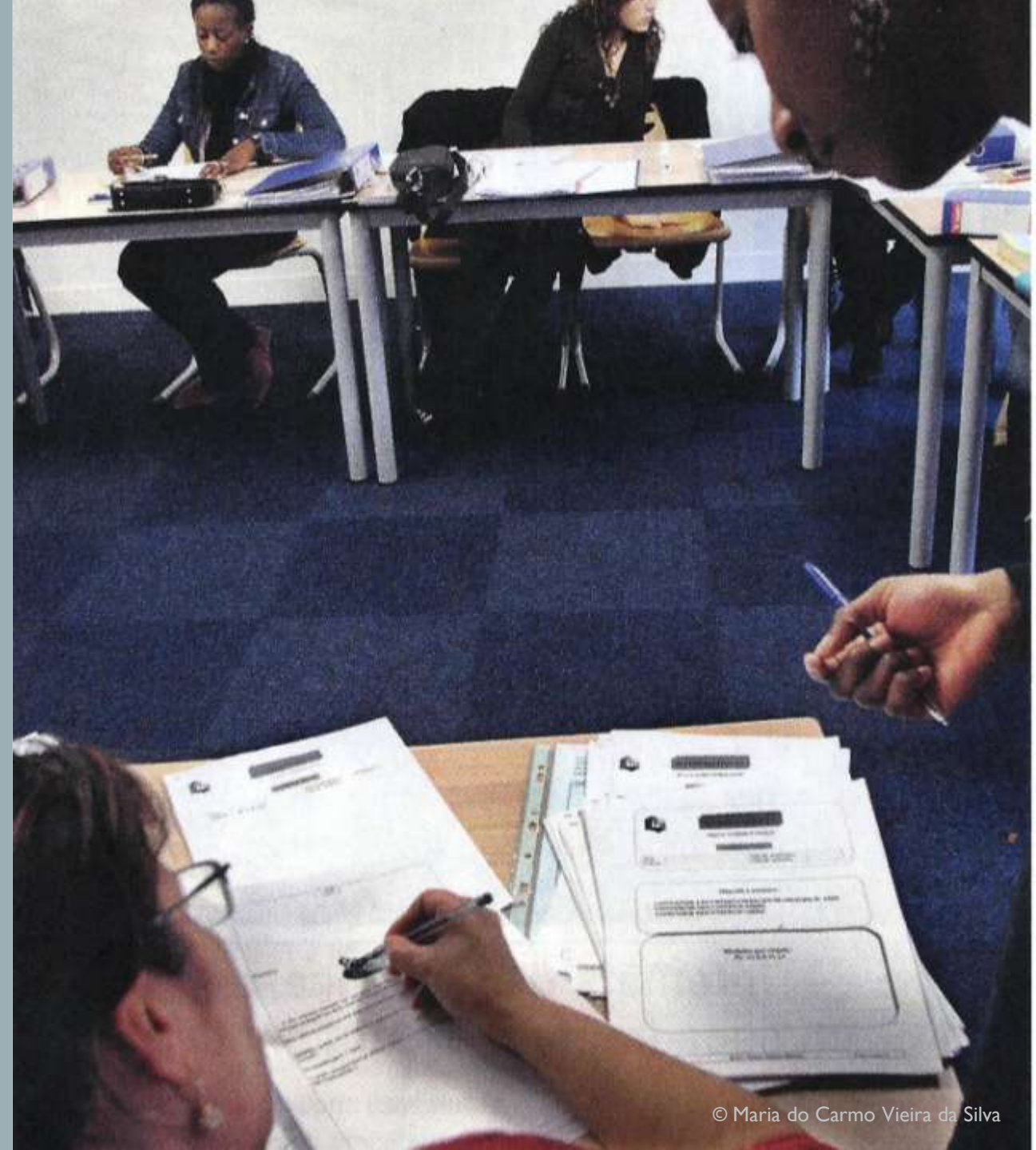
*Maria do Carmo Vieira da  
Silva*

*New University of Lisbon*

# KEY AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR THOSE WANTING TO IMPROVE THEIR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

## KEY WORDS:

- . different ways of living
- . willingness to meet others
- . understanding the difference
- . intercultural awareness
- . degrees of intercultural awareness
- . developing intercultural awareness



# TALK TO PEOPLE WHO KNOW THE CULTURE ABOUT COMMON TRAPS AND PROBLEMS

- Before you go, find people who know the region to which you're travelling, and ask their advice. Ask your co-workers what people commonly do that's just 'wrong', or what problems they have encountered, and learn from it. Listen carefully to their answers, including what they don't say, as this can tell you a lot.

# *SOME KNOWLEDGE OF THE CULTURES, ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS, HISTORY AND GENERAL WAY OF LIVING OF DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND NATIONS*

- **Recognition that these aspects affect behavioural norms.**
- For example, there is considerable 'history' between the Greeks and Turks, and therefore it may be considered potentially a problem to serve Turkish food to a Greek person.
- **An understanding of how culture can affect communication and language.**
- For example, people from Nordic countries are often said to speak more directly than native English speakers who tend to use more 'polite' language. Scandinavians in the UK have reported causing offence to English people by failing to say 'please' and 'thank you' enough.

*SOME UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONVENTIONS THAT  
MAY GOVERN BEHAVIOUR IN CERTAIN SPECIFIC  
INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS, SUCH AS VIEWS ON  
THE ROLE OF WOMEN, OR THE LICENCE (OR  
OTHERWISE) PERMITTED TO CHILDREN*

- Crucially, awareness of your own and other people's beliefs and values, and a willingness to recognise when these may clash.
- Sensitivity towards cultural stereotypes that may affect and interfere with intercultural communication.

# DEMONSTRATE YOUR WILLINGNESS TO MEET OTHERS AT LEAST HALFWAY BY LEARNING A FEW PHRASES IN THEIR LANGUAGE

- This is easy if you know that you're going on holiday somewhere, but it's also important for expatriate assignments and other business trips. A few phrases, even if it's only 'Good morning', 'good evening', and 'thank you', will go a long way.
- There are plenty of free language resources available on the internet so there is no excuse for ignorance.
- *If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.*
- *If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.*

# *ADAPT YOUR BEHAVIOUR, AND DON'T ALWAYS EXPECT OTHERS TO ADAPT TO YOU*

- This includes not being offended if someone unwittingly does something that you find difficult to accept. You don't have to accept it, but it's best to explain politely why you find it hard, not just go off in a sulk.
- You may also to be aware of some of the traps and miscommunications that are potentially possible.

# CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND THAT OF OTHERS

- The best way to avoid misunderstandings is to listen carefully and check understanding regularly in the course of a conversation.
- Ask questions to make sure that you have understood, and ask others to recap what you have said to ensure that they have understood you.





## *DON'T BE AFRAID TO APOLOGISE*

- You can usually see quite quickly if you have caused offence.
- The fastest way to manage that is to apologise, and ask what it was that you did. A confession of total ignorance will often go a long way to mitigate offence. Ignoring it will just offend further.

# USE LOCAL TELEVISION TO LEARN ABOUT BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AND NORMS

- You wouldn't want to rely on television dramas as your only source of information, but they can provide useful insights.
- In the UK, for instance, *Coronation Street* or *EastEnders* could give you an idea of what's considered acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Comedies are perhaps less reliable as they often use communication difficulties to generate laughs.

# *REFLECT ON YOUR EXPERIENCE*

- As with so many aspects of life, a little reflection about your experience can help you to put it in context, especially if you are able to discuss it with someone else in a similar position.

# AN UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENCE

- Good intercultural communication fundamentally requires an understanding that different cultures have different standards and norms. But more, it requires an understanding that individuals are shaped, but not bounded, by their cultural background and that, sometimes, you have to meet people more than halfway.
- Intercultural awareness is, quite simply, having an understanding of both your own and other cultures, and particularly the similarities and differences between them.
- These similarities and differences may be in terms of values, beliefs, or behaviour. They may be large or small, and they matter very much when you are meeting or interacting with people who are from another cultural background.
- Understanding that people from different cultures have different values is the foundation to good intercultural relationships.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

- In a multicultural world, most of us need at least some intercultural awareness every day. For those who live or work away from our native countries, or who live or work closely with those from another country, it is absolutely vital.
- But even just for a two-week holiday abroad, intercultural awareness is a vital quality that can prevent you from causing offence.
- 
- Research from the British Council suggests that employers value intercultural skills, including foreign languages, but in particular intercultural awareness, understanding of different viewpoints, and demonstrating respect for others.

*THERE ARE FOUR GROUPS OF PEOPLE  
WHO ARE MOST LIKELY TO NEED  
INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS:*

Expatriates

People who work globally

People who work in multicultural teams

Tourists

# *PEOPLE WHO WORK GLOBALLY*

- Even those based in their native country may, in a global economy, need to work with people from other countries and cultures.
- A little intercultural awareness may prevent them giving or taking offence unnecessarily.

# PEOPLE WHO WORK IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

- There are very few of us who do not have at least some contact with colleagues or acquaintances who are non-native. Some industries and organisations have large numbers of migrant workers, for example, healthcare and social care where nurses are highly sought-after and often recruited from abroad.
- Intercultural awareness helps to ease colleague–colleague and colleague–manager interactions and prevent misunderstandings.



# **DEGREES OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS: A SPECTRUM**

**WE CAN DEFINE FOUR LEVELS OF  
INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS,  
WHICH CAN BROADLY BE  
CONSIDERED AS A SPECTRUM.**

1	My way is the only way	<p><b>People either do not know, or do not care, that there is any other way of doing things.</b></p> <p><b>You can see this in small children, who are often stunned when they hear people talking another language because it has never occurred to them before that anyone might not be the same as them.</b></p>
2	My way is the best way	<p>At this level, people are aware that other people do things differently, or have different beliefs, but they don't think that's appropriate.</p> <p>Their way is not the only way, but it is unmistakably the best. We could call this world view the 'colonial' approach: we will show you how to do it our way because it is the best thing for you.</p>
3	There are several ways, my way and others	<p>People have a clear understanding that there are other world views, and that different people behave and believe differently.</p> <p>They make no judgement about the relative merits of these views as a whole, but recognise that different cultures and views may have different merits. They are willing to bring together the good from several different aspects in a synergistic way.</p>
4	Our way	<p>This final stage brings people together to create a new, shared culture, which has new meaning for everyone.</p>

# **DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS**

What can you do to develop intercultural awareness?

Here are some ideas!

# ADMIT THAT YOU DON'T KNOW

## ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR IGNORANCE IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS LEARNING ABOUT OTHER CULTURES

- **Develop an awareness of your own views, assumptions and beliefs, and how they are shaped by your culture.**  
Ask yourself questions like: what do I see as 'national' characteristics in this country? Which 'national' characteristic do I like and dislike in myself?
- **Take an interest.**  
Read about other countries and cultures, and start to consider the differences between your own culture and what you have read.
- **Don't make judgements.**  
Instead, start by collecting information. Ask neutral questions and clarify meaning before assuming that you know what's going on.
- **Once you have collected information, start to check your assumptions.**  
Ask colleagues or friends who know more about the culture than you, and systematically review your assumptions to make sure that they are correct.
- **Develop empathy.**  
Think about how it feels to be in the other person's position.
- **Look for what you can gain, not what you could lose.**  
If you can take the best from both your own and someone else's views and experiences, you could get a far greater whole that will benefit both of you. But this requires you to take the approach that you don't necessarily know best, and even that you don't necessarily know at all.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CELEBRATING DIVERSITY

In the final analysis, intercultural awareness leads ideally to a point of celebrating diversity.

That is, recognising that everyone, of whatever background, skills or experience, brings something unique to the table. If you, collectively, can harness that and bring everyone's skills together, the group can be better than the sum of its parts.



# *INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION*

**спасибо**

*Maria do Carmo Vieira da  
Silva*