A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF
THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THEORIES
OF EDWARD TWITCHEL HALL

Introduction

Michael has just graduated from a respected college with a major in Spanish. He had four years of vocabulary, grammar, and mock business scenarios, all thoughtfully arranged by his American Spanish professor who had been teaching Spanish for twenty years. Michael could conjugate verbs without thinking, he could translate volumes of Spanish writing accurately, and he was one of the best Spanish speakers among his classmates during weekly presentations. Michael decided to go on a mission trip the summer after his graduation. He was part of a team ministering in Ecuador, a country where nearly everyone speaks Spanish. Michael assumed the transition from the classroom to the real world would not be that difficult.

Michael headed to the elevator of the hotel he was staying at in Quito. As the door opened, Michael and three Ecuadorians stepped into the elevator. Michael, nervous, but eager to practice his Spanish said hello and made small talk. He noticed an announcement on the wall of the elevator and turned to read it, all the while continuing his conversation with the Ecuadorians. All of a sudden, no one spoke any more and as the door opened and Michael attempted to say goodbye, all he received were angry looks from the Ecuadorians. What had happened? What had Michael said? The truth is, nothing Michael ‘said’ was offensive. Rather, what his body said for him was the culprit. When Michael had turned his back to read the announcement, the Ecuadorians had been deeply insulted by this offensive gesture. Michael had not realized that communication is much more than speaking the language. More than that, communication looks differently among different cultures. As well prepared as Michael thought he was, he still
had much to learn about intercultural communication. This paper will examine these deeper aspects of intercultural communication by describing and then analyzing the theories of intercultural communication pioneer Edward T. Hall. It will be shown that Hall relied heavily on insights from the animal kingdom that he attempted to carry over into human behavior. This approach allowed for several new and helpful insights but also prevented Hall from exploring the full range of cultural distinctions existing in a world created in accordance with biblical truth.

**The Communication Theories of E.T. Hall**

E. T. Hall is a recognized pioneer for the study of intercultural communication. Hall developed his preliminary positions through years of personal observations of the animal world, living with various cultures, and then completing a doctoral degree in anthropology from Columbia University in 1945. Much of Hall’s work has become the basis for later expansion by other writers. Hall’s main effort was to provide a tool allowing for the categorization and comparison of other cultures so that one might clarify one’s own way of life first, and then to begin to understand something of the other cultures one might encounter. One of Hall’s main contributions to the discussion is his theory that culture is communication. Prior to Hall, a complete theory of culture as communication had not been presented in one place.¹ The following section will survey Hall’s cultural distinctions that he has used to prove that culture communicates.

**Culture: The Hidden Dimension**

Culture is everywhere but is so innate that it is often not recognized until one ventures elsewhere. A proverb says, “A man who has never travelled thinks his mama’s cooking is the

best.” There certainly are visible aspects of a culture such as the dress of the locals. However, Hall notes that the most important aspects of differing cultures are likely to be those “out-of-awareness” features, the hidden dimension of the new culture. One might think that this hidden aspect of culture would pale in comparison to the visible behaviors but Hall goes on to say, “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.” The hidden dimension of a culture, much like the submerged part of an iceberg, makes up the bulk of the culture and keeps the visible component afloat. Each aspect of culture carries with it a message that is read one way by the insider and read, perhaps, another way by the outsider. Culture communicates, but, prior to Hall, its message was not clearly discernable.

Upon first notice, language is a blur of sound, an indistinguishable jumble. As the learner perseveres, syllables become coherent, then words, then a pattern of grammar, then how something is said, and then, why something is said the way it was. Educated and insightful observation reveals more and more subtleties within the spoken language. Learning a culture is similar to learning a language. At first the new sights, sounds, and smells are a blur of confusion. Everything blends together. As time goes by, however, the acute observer will begin to notice certain distinctions. What is done and how it is done begin to communicate a message just as powerful as the spoken language.

Hall was the first to develop a framework for observing culture. He notes that the first step is to learn how to recognize cultural distinctives. First, it is important to see that Hall has

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2Ibid., 52.
3Ibid., 53.
4Ibid., 124.
broken culture into two broad components, what he calls Set Theory. The pervasive set is that which is first noticeable.\(^5\) The tip of the cultural iceberg might be composed of dress, language, seating arrangements, or greeting protocol. The second half of Hall’s Set Theory is the illusive set, the phantom component of culture.\(^6\) The illusive set contains stress on words, pitch, or tone. Other examples would be worldview, gender roles, and status roles. Set Theory helps the cultural observer to look for the complete picture of culture. Hall has pioneered what he calls the Primary Message Systems (PMS) that are present in every culture. These systems were largely lifted from Hall’s and others observations of animal communities. The perceptive observer will look for the pervasive and illusive components within each system. The ten dimensions of the PMS are outlined below:

Hall’s Primary Message Systems\(^7\)

1. Interaction – speech, tone, voice, gesture, play, and defense.
2. Association – The ‘pecking order.’ Rank and societal structure.
3. Subsistence – Food, work, distinction within work (who cleans the toilet?).
5. Territoriality – use of space.
6. Temporality – rhythm of life, linear or cyclical history, rate of speech.
7. Learning – Logical vs. experiential. How is knowledge transferred? Who goes to school?
8. Play – intertwined with the other systems.
9. Defense – Against nature, against the spiritual - religion, and against enemies.
10. Exploitation – of society, nature, ect. for the culture’s own gain.

Space constraints prevent a more detailed explanation of each system. Hall’s point is that these ten systems are present in every culture and are interrelated. The categories provide a framework by which to systematically observe and learn a new culture. Notice that language is only one small aspect of culture and all ten systems work together to allow cultural communication to

\(^5\)Ibid., 129.  
\(^6\)Ibid., 136.  
\(^7\)Ibid., 61-81.
A further distinction made by Hall is that these systems are played out on three levels in a society: the formal, informal, and the technical. Hall calls these levels the major triad.\textsuperscript{8} Time is useful to illustrate the distinctions of the triad. Formal time would be what the clock says. An important meeting is scheduled to begin at 10:00 A.M. Informal time would be saying it is 10:00 A.M. when it is really 10:02 A.M. Precision is not needed because a general, informal answer is sufficient. Technical time might come into play in the finals of the 100-meter dash at the Olympics. It is not enough to say the winner clocked 9.7 seconds (formal time) or 10 seconds (informal time), when he actually clocked precisely 9.73 seconds – ahead of second place in 9.77 seconds. This level of technical precision would seem culturally out of place if the boss called a meeting to begin at exactly 10:08.05 A.M., not before or after.

Now that some of Hall’s general theories such as PMS and set theory have been introduced, it is helpful to describe several of Hall’s sub-categories of culture. The cultural distinctions listed below are those primarily developed by Hall.

**Chronemics**

The first distinction to be understood is chronemics or the use of time. Time is a language of its own. Time can speak more plainly than words, coming through loud and clear. Various cultures view and use time differently. In the U.S., a mid-day call may be viewed neutrally and not be answered, while an early morning call brings urgency, and a middle of the night call could signal a matter of life or death.\textsuperscript{9} Time can be used to send a message of coldness

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 87.\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 25.
if an appointment is kept waiting or time can convey importance if an unexpected appointment is ‘squeezed in’ right away.

Navajo and other indigenous peoples can view time like space, whereas only what is immediately visible is real. The future has little reality because it cannot be seen and we are not ‘there’ yet. Other cultures have an orientation toward the past, where events can ‘stack up’ and weigh heavily on the present. An example is the rearward orientation of many Muslims. Hundreds of years have passed since the Crusades but these dreadful events still weigh heavily in the minds and culture of Arab Muslims. Arabs are certainly not future oriented, thinking it offense to presume to know what Allah will decree. Westerners, and Americans in particular, tend to think of time as something fixed and inescapable, a part of the environment. Time is linear, heading into the future, and is segmented, scheduled, and manageable. The American future perspective is short, perhaps ten years, compared to the Asian view of future, which can occupy centuries. Proper understanding and use of time is one key to functioning well cross-culturally.

**Proxemics**

The next cultural distinction to be examined is proxemics or the use of space. Hall had a lifelong fascination with animals and many of his works in human cultural distinctions actually began through a study of animal habits. Hall first noticed that animals seemed to have a perception of space that was understood through the ears, eyes, and nose. Animals used their senses to gain an understanding of their territory. As Hall observed among animals and then

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10Ibid., 33.

11Ibid., 28.

humans, territoriality can be used to send a message. Germans are notorious for their obsession with territory and personal space. German offices are often compartmentalized and sealed off from interference. The German use of territory communicates a message, as one American manager observed:

Germans not only insist on having their own work space at work, but they clearly mark their territory within the organization. They will brook no interference either. . . . They simply do not share information or communicate details about their divisions’ operations to people outside their own area.  

Hall observes a four-level distinction in the use of space. Each distinction or distance varies according to culture and is used only in culturally appropriate contexts. The four distances are intimate, personal, social, and public space. If one does not use the proper communication distance, a cultural incident can occur. For example, if the normal social conversation distance in the host culture is several feet and a foreigner is used to a conversation distance of mere inches, the native may feel threatened as he perceives the foreigner to be ‘in his face’ rather than respecting his personal distance. Space can be used to send a message.

Body Movement

Hall observes that body movement uncannily accompanies language. The body often gives away the true intentions of the words. The process of body movement following and expressing a speaker’s true intent is called syncing. Syncing is much more than simply using body movement to accentuate and reinforce the spoken message. Hall’s research reveals that


14Hall, The Hidden Dimension, 110-22.

people have an extremely difficult time masking their body movement and expressions when they are attempting to lie or hide true feelings. The current television show *Lie to Me* is based largely on Hall’s understanding of syncing.

Closely related to body movement is the concept of rhythm. Some cultures are known for a certain rigidity or fluidity of the body when speaking. Most people in the United States stand fairly still when speaking. *Lie to Me* main character Cal Lightman, on the contrary, has a very distinct rhythm when talking. Lightman almost glides along, with very pronounced leans and bends to his body that are immediately recognizable as different than the cultural norm. These movements ebb and flow as Lightman interrogates his suspect, adding an additional punch to his questioning.

**Context**

Culture tells a person what to pay attention to and what to ignore. The surrounding atmosphere, physical and imaginative, spoken and unspoken, has a large impact on the message being communicated. Again, communication is much more than the spoken or written language. Having a machine generated translation of one language to another will give the words and a sense of the grammar, but all sense of context will be lost. The real meaning of a message comes through the context. Western thinking tends to focus on ideas rather than their surrounding events. A Westerner might find a piece of paper on the street with a syllogism on it and find the idea to be true, totally disconnected from any situation or context. Much of the world does not operate this way. The situation or context gives guidance to interpreting the message. Hall distinguishes between two types of context, high and low.

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16Ibid., 85.

17Ibid., 86.
High context cultures are those where most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the persons engaging in communication. Little information is coded in the explicit, transmitted message. An example from China is helpful. To be literate in Chinese, one has to be versed in Chinese history. The characters and words carry so much implicit historical meaning that one would make a fool of oneself without understanding the unspoken contexts.\footnote{Ibid., 91.} Information is shared widely between individuals in a high context culture, so much so that little by way of details is needed or even expected when discussing a matter.\footnote{Hall, \textit{Understanding Cultural Differences}, 6.} Older, well-established cultures like China, Japan, and many indigenous peoples operate out of a high context.

Low context cultures are those where most of the information needing to be communicated is included in the explicit code. Low context cultures are usually young or very blended so there is little shared background. Networks and relationships have not been developed over centuries but perhaps only days, weeks, or months. Reference to the past and how things have always been done is not possible so new details must be supplied. It may take longer to get the information across but changes can be made more quickly because no one is attached to a high context.\footnote{Ibid., 101.} High context or low, culture can aid or hinder one’s attempt to communicate and must be understood and accommodated.

**Action Chains**

The final cultural distinction to be examined is what Hall calls action chains. In one
sense, action chains are a predictable system of dealing with events. These chains provide the script for how one handles various cultural situations. Action chains are often built into a culture, sometimes even trapping people within the chain when consequences are unwanted. An example of an action chain trap is the revenge killings found in the Sawi people of *Peace Child*. When the enemy tribe raided and killed anyone within the Sawi tribe, family members of the murdered person were culturally required to complete the action chain and perform a revenge killing. The tribes became trapped in a web of seemingly endless and unwanted killing. Action chains play out in every culture in the world, but usually in a more commonplace manner. Cultures typically follow one of two types of action chains: polychronic or monochronic.

Polychronic Action Chains involve a complex meshing of many activities at once. These action chains are often found in high context cultures where much information is understood a priori, allowing for rapid transition between tasks. Polychronic people usually value relationships over tasks so frequent interruptions are not seen as a nuisance because they provide a welcome break from the task so that a relationship may be enjoyed. Because the focus is more on people than tasks, those using polychronic action chains are able to ‘break’ the chain if they do not like the foreseen outcome.\(^1\)

Monochronic action chains operate in a much more linear fashion than polychronic action chains. The linear chain can be disrupted or broken if too many things begin to happen at once. Multiple actions are seen as a bad thing, both disorderly and inefficient. The task is prioritized over relationship so people can take a secondary position to ‘getting the work done.’ Monochronic action chains are often coupled with low context cultures because each action or task requires extensive background information, which in turn makes it difficult to juggle many.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., 25.
tasks at once. Monochronic cultures prefer to address one issue at a time, allowing all the needed information to come in and be processed, and then to focus on the task until it is completed.

Summary

E. T. Hall pioneered many advances in the field of intercultural communication. Hall’s Primary Message Systems provided a framework for the systematic study of cultural elements across wide and varied cultural landscapes. Hall’s investigative method largely began with his observation of the animal world, looking for patterns of behavior that might carry across the species divide into the human realm. Hall built upon those animal studies that were prevalent in his day so that a more complete analysis of human cultural behavior could begin to be explored. Interculturalists today should be grateful for the advances made by the field’s pioneer, E. T. Hall. Next, an analysis of Hall’s theories will be made, showing first the positive aspects of his work and finally, weaknesses of Hall’s approach will be examined.

An Analysis of E.T. Hall’s Communication Theories

Hall clearly built the foundation for the study of intercultural communication. Later writers like Bennett, Lanier, Lingenfelter, Storti, Smith, and Hofstede are indebted to their pioneer. Hall’s academic career spanned several decades, only recently concluding with his death. Like many pioneers, Hall’s work has become the subject of much discussion. Below are several discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of Hall’s methodological approach.

Strengths of Hall’s Methodology

Hall’s most insightful and helpful contribution was his Primary Message Systems. Prior to Hall, few anthropologists had a means to observe and compare cultures. It was difficult
to learn a culture and even more difficult to teach others how to learn a culture. Hall’s PMS provided a systematic and somewhat comprehensive framework from which to observe and categorize cultural elements. Now, students can learn about culture more rapidly and are able to gain more insight from one culture into another because of the helpful categories of the PMS. Later cultural frameworks are more developed and perhaps more clear and helpful than Hall’s. Donald K. Smith’s Twelve Signal Systems\textsuperscript{22} is perhaps the most adequate framework available today but as noted above, Smith had the benefit of Hall’s previous work and was able to build from and modify the PMS. It stands that Hall’s PMS was one of his most influential contributions to intercultural communication.

One other enormous contribution Hall made to the field was his understanding of culture as communication. Other specialists such as Sapir had dabbled with the theory but it was Hall that made the case most clearly. The PMS show clearly that dynamics like use of time, space, and body movement speak a message that language cannot. The opening scenario of this paper is a common one among first time cross-cultural travelers. Knowing the language is but one small step in communicating in a culturally relevant manner. Hall has armed the researcher and traveler alike with the tools necessary to send and receive messages that are as analogous with their intent as possible.

Much of Hall’s pioneering discoveries came from his fascination with animals. Hall applied biological research from the animal kingdom to the human realm, looking for many of the same tendencies in human culture. Hall’s approach allowed him to discover much of what we have talked about above but the approach is not without weaknesses. The following section will examine some of the weaknesses to Hall’s methodology.

Weaknesses of Hall’s Methodology

Hall is not shy about admitting the basis for his approach to intercultural communication. The first page of the preface to *The Hidden Dimension* states:

As an anthropologist I have become accustomed to going back to the beginning and searching out the biological substructures from which a given aspect of human behavior springs. This approach underscores the fact that man is first, last, and always, like other members of the animal kingdom, a prisoner of his biological organism. The gulf that separates him from the rest of the animal kingdom is not nearly so great as most people think. The more we learn about animals and the intricate adaptation mechanisms evolution has produced, the more relevant these studies become to the solution of some of the more baffling human problems.  

Hall proposes that humans are prisoners of their biological organism. This idea leads to the presupposition that humans must act a certain way in response to a stimulus but Hall clearly diverges from such a strict assumption when he states that every culture will have statistical ‘fliers.’ In fact, humans are all of the same species so, according to Hall’s approach, one might expect all members of that species to operate in a similar fashion, driven to do so by the evolutionary process that has determined their biological response. Lingenfelter offers a helpful correction when he states, “We intend to make it clear that individuals—the work of God’s creative activity—differ greatly in their values and orientations, as do the societies of which they are members.” These differences are not due to evolution or biological imprisonment but rather, to the creative mind of God.

In addition, unlike animals, humans are capable of masking their true intentions. An offended Chinese does not have to show his feelings but is capable of setting them aside, masking them, or even lying—all actions that animals are not capable of. Hall is correct to

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observe, like many others, that humans within a certain culture tend to behave a certain way, according to the script of their culture, but they cannot be said to be bound to action by an uncontrollable biological impulse.

Furthermore, an evolutionary driven model is not compatible with the biblical worldview. Evolution and biological impulse free mankind from universal truth. The only truth that operates is survival of the fittest. This approach leads to viewing cultures as “silos, distinct from other cultures and a universe unto themselves.”

Sin is stripped of offense and rebellion against a loving Creator is reduced to culturally defined actions. One might say that what is sin in one culture is not sin in another and that is ok. Superseding all cultures and worldviews is the biblical worldview given by God himself. Hiebert rightly notes that it sounds arrogant to state that there is one biblical worldview and that it is right and enforceable on all cultures. After all, are not there many worldviews in the Bible such as the Hebrew worldview or the Greek one?

Hiebert responds that on one level there are multiple worldviews in scripture but these worldviews are human attempts to understand what God has revealed and are culturally driven rather than looking at the biblical worldview from God’s perspective. Yet there exists an overlaying theme in scripture, one that transcends all cultures and manmade interpretations. The truth is that God created mankind, the world, and the animals according to His revealed word, not two jungle birds mating, or spirits rising out of Lake Titicaca, or evolution. Mankind rebelled against God through sin, real sin that exists in every culture, causing man to be separated from God and destined to a real Hell. All men are transgressors of The Law, not just

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laws or cultural faux pauxs. God sent His son, Jesus Christ, to become the God-Man and die on the cross, suffering punishment and the full wrath of God against mankind and fully satisfying it. Jesus rose from the dead and is seated in a real Heaven with God. The Lord is now calling people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to repentance from their sinful understanding of God and reality – their culturally shaped worldview – and to trust in Jesus alone to restore the broken relationship with the Creator. There comes a return of Christ for the judgment of all mankind and then a resurrection of the dead – those in Christ to eternity with him and those outside Christ to an eternity in separation from him. This is the true truth and speaks authoritatively to every culture. Hall would not agree with this interpretation and his methodological bias precludes him from even considering it. The result is that Hall is blinded from fully understanding culture because he cannot view any culture from the vantage point of the biblical worldview.

Conclusion

Hall never intends to teach us how to change a culture and why would he if truth and rightness are culturally defined? What must an evangelical Christian make of Hall’s writings? As stated above, Hall has made a tremendous and essential contribution to the field of intercultural communication but Hall’s work alone is not enough for the biblically informed traveler. Christians should read Hall and will benefit from his PMS and insights on culture as communication. However, Hall does not speak much to the spiritual component of culture, particularly spiritual warfare and the effects of Satan’s kingdom as it collides with God’s Kingdom. Hiebert is a great companion here. His treatment of the battle of the cosmos is especially helpful to avoid cultural traps when dealing with good and evil.27

Another helpful perspective on how culture and scripture interact is Eugene Nida’s Tri-cultural model of missionary culture, target culture, and the biblical culture.\textsuperscript{28} Nida seeks to blend insights from anthropology with an informed and honest view toward the biases of the sending and receiving culture against scripture. Proper critical contextualization\textsuperscript{29} involves all three components of the tri-cultural model, including, but often neglected, are the insights from those within the target culture. Both human cultures must ultimately yield to the biblical culture however. Contextualization is an interesting and very important topic but is out of the scope of this paper.

Edward T. Hall truly was a pioneer of intercultural communication. Without Hall’s groundbreaking studies, the field would be set back several decades. One key to Hall’s insights was his study of animal culture, looking for dynamics that might carry over and shed light on human culture. This approach started the wheel in motion which led to Hall’s PMS, which in turn began to give anthropologists categories from which to observe and then teach culture. As shown above, the model is not without its weaknesses and limits. However, intercultural communication and to some extent, contextualized missions, would not be where they are without one of the field’s giants, E. T. Hall.


\textsuperscript{29}For an expanded analysis of what I mean by critical contextualization see Hiebert, \textit{Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues}, 75-92 and Sills, \textit{Reaching and Teaching}, 193-213.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


