

HIGH AND LOW CONTEXT COMMUNICATION IN CULTURE FRAMES AND ACTION CHAINS

CONTEXTING:

Contexting situationalizes communication of meanings mainly through use of time and space. It is based on the fact that our actions and reactions are mostly automatic and we need to avoid information overload.

<i>High Context</i>	<i>Low Context</i>
Learn from the people	Classroom education
Role-playing	Discussing
Audio-vis aids	Lecture
art	science
fine art	poster
English law	French law
Tamale law	Accra law
Village law	City law
“lampeau”	N. American taxes
IRS in Ghana	IRS in N. America
Litelalia	all other languages
African languages	European languages
English	German
Activism = good	Action = bad
emotion = good	emotion = bad
Dionysian	Apollonian
Right brain	Left brain
Einstein integration	Library science
little info	much information
language learning	language teaching
communication fast	communication slow
communication imp.	facts are important
focus on particularity	focus on universality
folk taxonomies	scientific taxonomies
messy	orderly
creativity	sameness
high stability	low stability
little change	quick change

ORGANIZATION OF CONTEXTS is by:

- Subjects or activities: e.g. teaching, law, politics, art, theology, ministry, development, direction giving, shopping.
- Past experiences: the contexting of one’s first culture, one’s childhood, student days etc.
- Situations: behavior which depends on the situation, paying taxes, personal situational needs, hospital equipment proxemics, firestation proxemics, classroom proxemics.
- Statuses: expressing status depends on situations.
- Cultures: USA is too LC. It leads to information overload. Everything is intensely screened, leads to instability, obsolescence, constant change.

All cultural systems: law, sex, politics, religion, military, family, marriage etc. are HC or LC.

ADJUSTING THE USE OF CONTEXT

Too much LC (e.g. in developing countries of Africa) blocks initiative, change, systematic reflection and evaluation, setting long term goals and cogent policies for development; implementing consistent strategies for development.

Too much HC (e.g. in the USA and Europe) leads to overwhelming bureaucracies, taking long time to say simple things, neurotic, overbearing, dehumanizing systems; too rapid change, information overload, breakdown in social organization and order.

Where there is too much HC: need to increase LC.

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CULTURE FRAMES “Situational behavior”

Culture frames are situational communicative events: the smallest viable units of a culture, which are still complete entities. Building blocks of culture, e.g., greeting, working, eating, bargaining, mourning, fighting, serving, hanging out, courting, playing, dancing, praying.

Culture Frames have perceptual dimensions:

More aware:	Less believable
linguistic-verbal	
linguistic-written	
vocal	
pictorial	
symbolic	
audio (sounds)	
kinesics (body movements)	
artifactual-material (things)	
tactile (touch)	
optic (light and colour)	
spatial (proxemic)	
temporal	
thermal	
olfactory	
personality	
Less aware:	More believable

We learn to speak using the natural frames in a culture: by gestalt, situationally (e.g., situational talk: baby talk, stranger talk, situational dialect, classroom talk, barroom talk, church talk, animal talk, date talk, husband/wife talk, lover talk, menu, insider/outsider.

People abide by the structures of their culture. Basic situational behavioral needs are structured differently from society to society: They guide how to be “loving, cooperative, peaceful, warlike, aggressive, hardworking, playful, hierarchical, competitive, materialistic, communicative.”

“Cultural Ethos” involves a stronger focus on some traits than others (e.g. hardworking, lazy, athletic, serious, welcoming, soft-hearted). No culture is perfectly balanced. Severe imbalance leads to “cultural neurosis.”

Studies of needs and values usually fall short of understanding the foci of a culture because situational needs vary greatly from context to context and are often too extensive to measure completely. What can be done is to focus on the elements of a frame—Action Chains.

ACTION CHAINS

A sequence of events involving two or more individuals participating within a contextual frame. Includes a beginning, a middle, and an end, and requires spatial and temporal dimensions.

To understand a culture is to be able to predict the action chains within a given culture frame.

QUALITIES

ACs must be completed or it leads to withdrawal, apathy, despair, destruction and aggression. In LC cultures people are MT (activities are serial, spacing is linear)

In HC cultures people are PT (are able to perform many activities at once; people more important so they can interrupt the chain).

HC/PT people stress relations over timetables. Better nice than precise!

HC vs. LC have different priorities, different rates of completion, different objectives on the same job.

EXAMPLE AC = LIBRARY COURTING

1. Boys stake out tables.
2. Girls join the boys.
3. Stretch break.
4. Coffee in hall.
5. Date on weekend.

OTHER EXAMPLES: Job interviews, a durbar, interviews, learning, telephone use

USA TELEPHONE: In the USA, the one receiving the call always speaks first saying, “Hello.” Then the one receiving identifies him/herself, the number or the place and waits for the other to be identified.

GHANA TELEPHONE: Caller speaks first “Hello”, receives “hello”, then initiates second round with “good morning,” receives the response “good morning”, then asks for the one he would like to speak to or simply begins the conversation.

GHANA Catholic RADIO NETWORK: Combines HC and extremely low LC (spelling out English words incorrectly over and over again).

USA: WELCOMING: In New England the established one must welcome the new neighbour. Sintim-Misa: How did she know I just arrived? “Thank you” receives response “You are welcome”

GHANA: GREETING: The passerby greets the one sitting. “Thank you” receives “Don’t mention it.”

PROJECTION: We tend to project our own AC patterns on other cultures. Try to look closely at what they really do not just what they say they do. Folklore as opposed to what people actually do.

CULTURES MUST BE LEARNED AS A WHOLE

The mind is internalized culture—Squaresville vs. Roundsville. One culture cannot be the measure of another. Because all aspects of culture are interlinked, to change one aspect means to change everything. Cultures must be learned as a whole, by gestalts. Then suddenly one day they take on their own internal logic—they cease to be translated.

CULTURES ARE IRRATIONAL

Formal Western “Logic” is LC. But Socratic logic is rational in some cultures but not others. Navaho and Japanese have wider and more inclusive culture frames. How are Ghanaians logical?

We need to understand our own culture because lack of understanding leads to neurosis. Cultural neurosis is the gap between the way a culture images itself and the way it actually is.

WE ARE CHAINED TO ACs

By extension transferrance

The grip of culture

Biological resistance to changing one’s thinking

Resistance to self-examination (ethnocentrism).