Communicative style
According to communications scholar Dean Barnlund, “communicative style” refers to:
1. The topics people like to discuss
2. People’s favorite forms of verbal (spoken) interaction
3. The depth of involvement people seek from each other
4. The communication channels people tend to rely on (verbal or non-verbal)
5. The level of meaning to which they are generally attuned (the factual or emotional content of messages).

When people with different communicative styles interact, they often misunderstand or misjudge each other. Therefore, it is helpful for international students to know something about the communicative style of Americans and the way it compares with their own communicative style. Here are some generalizations (subject to exceptions) about the communicative style of Americans:

The communicative style of Americans

Preferred topics
In casual conversation (called “small talk”), Americans prefer to talk about the weather, sports, jobs, mutual acquaintances, and past experiences, especially the ones they have in common with their conversation partners. As they grow up, many Americans are told not to discuss politics or religion, at least not with people they don’t know well, because religion and politics are considered controversial topics. Sex and bodily functions are also considered very personal topics and are likely to be discussed only between people who know each other very well. (Younger people generally discuss sex more freely than older people).

By contrast, people in some other cultures are taught to believe that politics and/or religion are good conversation topics, and they may have different ideas about what topics are too “personal” to discuss with others.

Favorite form of verbal interaction
In the typical conversation between Americans, no one talks for a very long time. Participants in conversations “take turns” frequently, usually after the speaker has spoken only a few sentences. Americans prefer to avoid arguments. If an argument is unavoidable, they prefer it to be restrained, carried on in a normal conversational tone and volume. Americans are generally somewhat impatient with “ritual” conversational exchanges. (Only a few of them are common: “How are you?” “Fine, thank you, how are you?” “Fine.” “It was very nice to meet you.” “I hope to see you again.”)

People from other countries may be more accustomed to speaking and listening for longer periods of time when they are in conversation. They may also be accustomed to more ritual interchanges (about the health of family members, for example) than Americans are. They may enjoy arguments, even vigorous arguments, of a kind that Americans are likely to find unsettling.

Depth of involvement preferred
Americans do not generally expect very much personal involvement from conversational partners. “Small talk” – without long silences, which cause uneasiness – is enough to keep the conversation going smoothly. It is only with very close friends (or with complete strangers whom they do not expect to see again) that Americans generally expect to discuss personal topics.
Some people from other countries prefer even less personal involvement than Americans do and rely more on ritual interchanges. Others come from countries where much more personal involvement is sought, as one wants to learn as much as possible about another person in order to open the possibility of developing a close relationship.

**Channels preferred**
The ideal among Americans is to be somewhat verbally adept, speaking in moderate tones, using relatively few and restrained gestures of the arms and hands. They do not touch each other very often.

By contrast, people from other countries might prefer even quieter conversations, less talking, and even more restrained gestures. Or they might be accustomed to louder voices, many people talking at once, the vigorous use of hands and arms to convey meanings or add emphasis, and/or more touching between conversation partners.

**Level of meaning emphasized**
Americans are generally taught to believe in the “scientific method” of understanding the world around them, so they tend to look for specific facts and physical or quantifiable evidence to support viewpoints.

Compared to Americans, people from some other countries might pay more attention to the emotional content or the human feelings contained in a message and are less concerned with what Americans would call “facts.”

**Misunderstandings and misjudgments**
Many misunderstandings and misjudgments can arise from interactions between people who have different communicative styles. Here are some examples:

- International students in the U.S. might hear little but “small talk” among Americans and conclude that Americans are not intellectually capable of anything more than simple talk about subjects such as the weather, sports, teachers, or their own social activities.
- Responding to people who customarily speak little and rely heavily on ritual communication, Americans might use the labels “shy,” “too formal,” or “too polite.”
- Vigorous arguing of the kind that is “natural” to some people may alarm Americans, who expect violence, or at least long-lasting anger to follow from loud disagreements.

These are just few of the misjudgments that arise between Americans and people from other countries. It can be very helpful to be aware of the differences in communicative style that produce them. Talking about differences in communicative style, when such a difference seems to be causing problems, is usually a good way to reduce the negative effects of the differences.

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