

Introduction:

Hoffman's (2024) article challenges traditional approaches to intercultural communication and competence, which often rely on culturalist theories that reduce individuals to stereotypes based on national or ethnic backgrounds. He critiques the works of scholars like Geert Hofstede and Erin Meyer, arguing that these approaches oversimplify the complexity of human interaction by focusing on schematic cultures rather than individual uniqueness. Hoffman advocates for an "inclusive communication" approach that emphasizes the importance of recognizing both equality and diversity among individuals. He proposes that communication should focus on the actual people involved, considering their unique identities, life stories, and the specific contexts in which interactions occur. This approach humanizes communication, treating people as complex individuals rather than representatives of their culture.

To support this inclusive approach, Hoffman introduces the TOPOI model, a practical tool for analyzing and addressing potential misunderstandings in communication. The model focuses on five areas—Tongue, Order, Persons, Organization, and Intentions—where differences may arise. Unlike culturalist models, TOPOI is not bound by cultural or national labels but offers a broader perspective on communication, acknowledging the many factors that influence interactions.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Identify and describe the differences between different approaches to intercultural communication.
2. Apply the TOPOI model to lived experiences.
3. Analyze a conversation based on the TOPOI model.

Time:

2 hours.

Group Size:

Entire Group.

Materials:

Inclusive Communication. Beyond intercultural communication and competence: 'Cultures don't meet, people do.' reading ([Links](#)); Participant Instructions for 2 case studies (both in [Downloads](#)).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Curiosity

- To ask complex questions about other cultures.
- To seek out and articulate answers to these questions that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

Openness

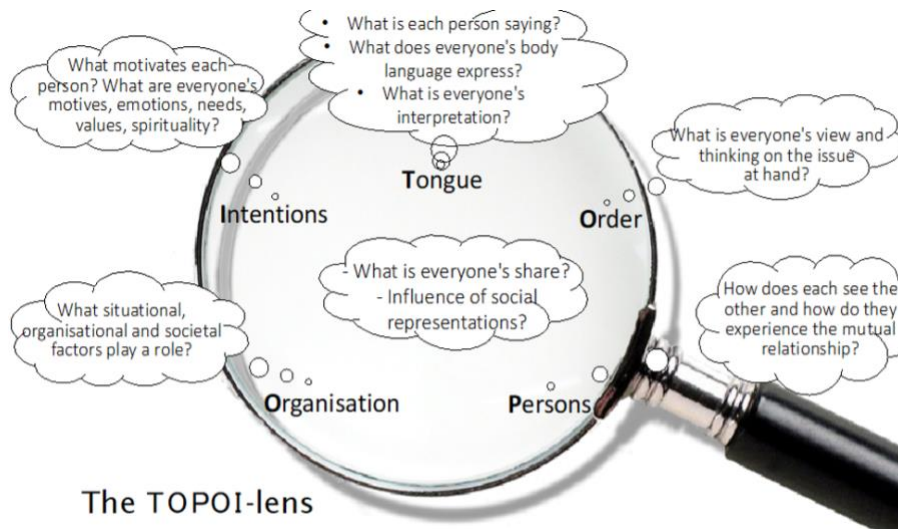
- To initiate and develop interactions with culturally different others.
- To suspend judgment in valuing interactions with culturally different others.

Other Skills:

Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion; Emotional Resilience.

Activity Instructions:

1. Assign the Hoffman (2024) reading to participants prior to this activity or instruct participants to read the article in class (article provided in [Links](#)).
2. Discussion: After participants have had the time to read the article, lead a discussion on the critiques of traditional culturalist models and components of the TOPOI model. You can utilize the following questions to guide discussion:
 - What are the main critiques Hoffman raises about traditional culturalist approaches?
 - Think of a time when you used a culturalist approach in an intercultural exchange. What were your internal perceptions? What happened?
 - What are the pros of using the culturalist approach? What are the drawbacks of a culturalist approach?
 - In what ways does Hoffman argue for diversity competence?
3. Introduce participants to the TOPOI model:



(Hoffman, 2024)

4. Continue the discussion with the following questions:
 - How do the five areas of the TOPOI model influence communication outcomes?
 - How can focusing on individuals rather than cultural stereotypes change the dynamics of communication?

- How could the TOPOI model have influenced outcomes within the intercultural exchange you previously shared in this discussion?
 - How might your own communication style and biases affect your ability to communicate inclusively?
5. Choose one of the case studies (or both, depending on your time constraints) for participants to practice applying the TOPOI model. In Case Study 1, participants apply the TOPOI model to identify and address communication breakdowns in a healthcare setting, focusing on how cultural differences and individual perspectives contribute to misunderstandings. In Case Study 2, participants apply the TOPOI model to explore dynamics of conflict in a multinational team, focusing on how cultural backgrounds influence communication styles.

Case Study 1:

Maria, a nurse in a multicultural urban hospital, is assigned to care for Mr. Chen, an elderly patient with limited English proficiency. During a routine check-up, Maria asks Mr. Chen if he has been experiencing any pain. Mr. Chen nods and says "No," but appears visibly uncomfortable. Maria interprets this as confirmation that Mr. Chen is not in pain and proceeds with the check-up. Later, Mr. Chen's daughter arrives and expresses concern that her father has been in pain for days but did not want to burden the nurse. Maria realizes that the communication breakdown may have been due to cultural differences in expressing pain and discomfort.

Group Discussion: Break into small groups and discuss the case using the TOPOI model to analyze where the miscommunication occurred in the interaction between Maria and Mr. Chen.

- Tongue: How did language barriers and non-verbal cues contribute to the misunderstanding?
- Order: How did different communication patterns (e.g., indirect communication style) affect the interaction?
- Persons: What assumptions did Maria and Mr. Chen make about one another's communication based on their own cultural backgrounds?
- Organization: How might the healthcare system's protocols or environment have influenced the interaction?
- Intentions: What were Maria's intentions, what were Mr. Chen's intentions, and how might they have been perceived differently by one another?

Role-play: After discussing the TOPOI analysis, role-play a follow-up conversation between Maria and Mr. Chen's daughter, applying the TOPOI model to ensure clear and culturally sensitive communication.

Debrief: Reconvene as a large group and discuss the role-play experiences:

- What strategies were effective in bridging the communication gap in your role-play?
- How did the TOPOI model guide your role-play?
- What is your greatest takeaway from this activity?
- How might you apply this takeaway in future interactions?

Case Study 2:

A multinational engineering team is working on a high-stakes project with a tight deadline. The team consists of members from the U.S., Germany, Japan, and Brazil. Tensions arise when decisions need to be made quickly, and team members struggle with differing communication styles. For instance, the

German and American members prefer direct and assertive communication, while the Japanese and Brazilian members favor a more indirect and consensus-driven approach. A disagreement over the project timeline escalates, leading to frustration and decreased productivity.

Group Discussion: Break into small groups and discuss the conflict using the TOPOI model, focusing on how each component of the model might contribute to or help resolve the conflict.

- Tongue: How do different communication styles affect the team's ability to discuss timelines and responsibilities?
- Order: How do the team members' cultural norms regarding decision-making influence the conflict?
- Persons: What assumptions are team members making about each other's intentions based on their own cultural backgrounds?
- Organization: How might the organizational culture of the company or the project's structure contribute to the conflict?
- Intentions: What are the underlying intentions of each team member, and how might they be misunderstood?

Conflict Resolution Plan: Each group will create a conflict resolution plan based on the TOPOI model. The plan should outline steps to address the communication breakdown and promote effective collaboration. Groups should consider:

- Strategies for bridging communication style differences.
- Ways to establish common ground and mutual understanding.
- Methods for ensuring that all team members feel heard and respected.

Debrief: Reconvene as a large group and discuss conflict resolution plans:

- What strategies did you employ to work toward conflict resolution to bridge the communication gap and promote effective collaboration?
- How did the TOPOI model guide your conflict resolution plan creation?
- What is your greatest takeaway from this activity?
- How might you apply this takeaway in future interactions?