Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:
Culture, Power and Technology

Teaching Module

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 1</th>
<th>Learning Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 2</td>
<td>Lecture Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 3</td>
<td>Power Point Slides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 4</td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 5</td>
<td>Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 6</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 7</td>
<td>References</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology

Learning Objectives

These two 50-minute lessons will allow first-year students majoring in communication to understand the factors that influence interpersonal communication. The lecture mainly focuses on three specific issues that appear to pose the biggest challenge for interpersonal communication effectiveness in the twenty-first century.

The first 50-minute lesson introduces students: the definition of culture, key connections between culture and communication, cultural dimensions, cultural barriers, and some basic skills for effective cross-cultural communication like mindfulness. In the first part of the class, instructor gives a 20-25 minute lecture on those topics abovementioned to make students know basic conceptions and ideas related to culture and its influence on interpersonal communication. In the second half of the class, students are asked to do an activity based on what the instructor teaches, which allows students to apply culture dimensions and barriers in daily communication.

The second 50-minute lesson introduces students: the concept of power in interpersonal relationships, two general perspectives on power, the nature of power, power’s influence on human’s communication, the concept of “global village”, basic idea of cultivation theory, and the conception of “hegemony” in terms of media’s huge impact on people’s thinking. Similarly, in the first part of the class, instructor gives a 20-25 minute lecture on those topics abovementioned to make students know basic conceptions and ideas related to power and technology in context of communication and their influence on interpersonal communication. In the second half of the class, students are asked to do an activity based on what the instructor teaches, which allows students to apply the knowledge they learnt in class.

Power Point slides are used in class to make the lecture more organized and also allows students to make notes for later review. Moreover, a list of sources is provided to students for after-class reading. Last, a test based on these two lessons is given to students at the end of the second lesson to test how well they learnt.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology 

Lecture Notes #1

The Starting Point

Opening Case Study: Don Barrett is lead engineer in the U. S. Department of Education’s Assistive Technology programs. Recently he tried to purchase software from a vendor over the Internet. By using his keyboard, he was able to type and use tabs to complete the online form. However, when the Web site required him to click on a “Submit” button, he was unable to complete his order. Why? Don is blind. His screen reader was able to identify all of the fields to fill out the form, but he couldn’t see the mouse pointer to submit his order.

What does this story tell us?

Interpersonal communication, either face-to-face or online, is shaped by the technologically savvy world in which we live. In addition, the ways in which we communicate with others are also influenced by our cultural identities (Don’s cultural identity is his disability. He is also a certain age, race/ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class). Moreover, this case study also reveals that Don also has power through his technological abilities. How do those people without this power communicate with others?

The opening case study illustrates the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that communication in the twenty-first century is influenced by three things: culture, power and technology. This lecture will explain why we choose to focus on these three issues. It also allows you to understand the central role that each plays in different areas of interpersonal communication.
Culture: Definitions, dimensions, & Barriers

I. Definitions of Culture
   A. **Culture** refers to learned and shared values, beliefs, and behaviors common to a particular group of people (Orbe & Bruess, 2005).
   B. Culture also includes common artifacts, music, customs, food, language, dress, and celebrations.
   C. Culture creates a shared worldview.
   D. **Co-culture**: Social scientists use the term co-culture to describe the perception of membership in a group that is part of an encompassing culture (Orbe & Spellers, 2005).
   E. Co-cultures in North American society include: age, face/ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, physical disability, religion, an activity.

II. Culture and Communication (Key connections)
   A. Culture and communication are inseparable.
   B. Culture is the key source of meaning, sense-making.
      1. Culture is an important part of our standpoint—perspective through which we perceive the world.
      2. The core of **stand-point theory**: Individuals who share a common culture typically share a common set of experiences that influences how they see the world (Orbe & Bruess, 2005).
   C. Culture is learned through communication.
      1. **Enculturation**: It is a process of communicating one’s culture (socialization via family, school media, religion).
   D. Communication shapes culture (reciprocal relationship)
      1. **Acculturation**: process of acquiring other cultural approaches, values, etc.
   E. Language reflects culture & vice versa
      1. Reveals cultural attachments:
         a. **Forms**: language structures
         b. **Norms**: Conversational rules
c. **Ingroup/outgroup identification**: Knowledge of terminology & use (Communicating with others who share a common set of experiences is different from communicating with those who do not. E.g., women sometimes use girl or bitch to refer to themselves and other women.).

F. Intercultural communication: communication of group members that is influenced by different cultural perceptions, symbol systems, both verbal and non verbal.

1. **Degrees of cultural significance** (Encounters can fit along a spectrum of “interculturalness”):
   a. **The “most intercultural” end**: Situations where differences between the backgrounds and beliefs of communicators are high.
   b. **The “least intercultural” end**: Cultural differences make little difference.
   c. **“Third culture”**: A unique relationships shared by two or more people. It happens when communicators from different cultures are trying to establish some degree of relationship and understanding.

III. Dimensions of Culture (values seen as either-or orientations)

A. **Achievement vs. Nurturing**
   1. **Achievement culture**: It describes societies that place a high value on material success and a focus on the task at hand.
   2. **Nurturing culture**: Cultures that regard the support of relationships as an especially important goal.
   3. In some ways, the terms “hard” and “soft” are more descriptive:
      a. “Hard” cultures: Japan, Switzerland, and Germany.
      b. “Softer” cultures: Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark), Spain, and France.

B. **Tolerance for Ambiguity (uncertainty)**
   1. **High uncertainty avoidance**: value certainty; don not like ambiguity, insecurity.
   2. **Low uncertainty avoidance**: value uncertainty, comfortable with ambiguity, less information.
3. The ability to live with uncertainty is an essential ingredient of intercultural communication competence (Gudykunst, 1993b).

C. Power Distances

1. Definition of power distance: It is used to describe the degree to which members of a society accept an unequal distribution of power.

2. Low power distance: Cultures with low power difference believe in minimizing the difference between various social classes. The notion of challenging authority is acceptable even desirable. (e.g. U.S. and Canadian societies)

3. High power distance cultures: Value power of the few. (e.g., Philippines, Mexico, India and Singapore).

4. The degree of power distance in a culture is reflected in key relationships (e.g., communication between parents and children), on-the-job communication, and teacher-student communication.

D. Individualist vs. Collectivist

1. Individualist cultures: View their primary responsibility as helping themselves and value individual accomplishments. They are characterized by self-reliance and competition. (Examples: U.S., Canada, Australia and Great Britain.)

2. Collectivist cultures: Feel loyalties and obligations to an in-group (e.g. extended family, community or even the organization one works for). They are more attentive to and concerned with the opinions of significant others. (Examples: Latin American and Asia.)

E. Cultural Context

1. Edward Hall (1959) identified two distinct ways that members of various cultures deliver messages.

2. High context cultures: High context culture relies heavily on subtle, often nonverbal cues to maintain social harmony. Communicators in these societies learn to discover meaning from the context in which a message is delivered, such as the nonverbal behaviors of the speaker, the history of the relationship, and the general social rules that govern interaction between people.

3. Low context cultures: Low context cultures uses language primarily to express
thoughts, feelings, and ideas as directly and logically as possible. To low-context communicators, the meaning of a statement lies in the words spoken.

IV. Cultural Barriers

A. Ethnocentrism: It is an attitude that one’s own culture is superior to others. An ethnocentric person thinks—either privately or openly—that anyone who does not belong to his or her in-group is somehow strange, wrong, or even inferior.

B. Prejudice: An attitude that is caused by ethnocentrism. It is an unfairly biased and intolerant attitude toward others who belong to an out-group. (Note that the root term in “prejudice” is “pre-judge”)

C. Cultural Stereotyping: Exaggerated generalizations about a group. (Examples: All women are emotional; all older people are out of touch with reality; all immigrants are welfare parasites).

D. Assumed Similarity: Based on similar physical characteristics or cultural proximity.

E. Misinterpretation of Codes: Attachment of our cultural norms/values to other’s behaviors and actions.

F. Violation of Cultural Rules and Customs.

V. Mindfulness

A. Definition: Awareness of one’s own behavior and that of others. It is one important element for a communicator to acquire the culture-specific information that lead to competence (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

B. Charles Berger (1979) suggests three strategies for moving toward a more mindful, competent style of intercultural communication.

1. Passive observation: Involves noticing what behaviors members of a different culture use and applying these insights to communicate in ways that are most effective.

2. Active strategies: Include reading, watching films, and asking experts and members of the other culture how to behave, as well as taking academic courses related to intercultural communication and diversity (Carrell, 1997).

3. Self-disclosure: Involves volunteering personal information to people from the other culture with whom you want to communicate. One type of self-disclosure is
to confess you cultural ignorance. For example: This is very new to me. What’s the right thing to do in this situation?
Power & Technology

I. Power in Interpersonal Relationships

A. Definition of Power:
   1. The ability to influence others and be in control of what happens to you.
   2. All interactions reflect some form of power. Sometimes it is obvious (e.g., when a boss is talking to an employee), sometimes it is not (interactions among equals).
   3. Power is a dimension of all interpersonal relationships.

B. Perspectives on Power:
   1. General principle: Finite or infinite view of power.
      a. Finite view of power: Consider power as a fixed sum.
      b. Infinite view of power: Consider power as limitless.
   2. Finite View of power includes:
      a. Dominance: It means the only way for one person to gain power is for someone else to lose it. Power exists as an advantage because it allows people to control resources, ideas and/or people. The ultimate goal is to obtain enough power to reign over others.
      b. Empowerment: Sees power as something to be shared with others. This perspective sees power as a finite commodity, but centers on compassion to help those who are less powerful. However, it is still rooted in unequal relations.
   3. Infinite Views of Power includes:
      a. Synergy: A synergy perspective sees power as a process rather than as a commodity or an entity. It supports the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. People who operate within a synergistic perspective of power are aware of their own resources, as well as their personal strengths and weaknesses. (For instance, the Detroit Shock, the 2003 WNBA Champions, went from having the worst record to the best record in the
II. The Nature of Power

A. Microlevel Power: How power is used at microlevels of interpersonal communication or at a “surface-level” within daily power interactions. In 1959, French and Raven identified five basic sources of power:

1. Legitimate Power: Stems from social structures that give the right and/or responsibility to “control” others to certain people. Most societies recognize judges, police officers, and professor as the legitimate power. However, sometimes, the legitimate power one person has depends on the respect others have for him or her, not the position itself.

2. Reward Power: It is based on the ability to give others things they desire.

3. Coercive Power: It is based on the ability to punish.

4. Expert Power: It is based on the knowledge or experience that one person has and others want. Few individuals have expert power in all areas.

5. Referent Power: A person has referent power over someone else when that one person (Person A) has a desire to be like the other person (Person B), such as teachers, coaches, and older siblings often have this power over students, players, and younger siblings.

B. Macrolevel Power:

1. Understanding how power operates in everyday situations requires recognition of larger societal and cultural issues that inform different aspects of interpersonal communication. In other words, the way that we communicate interpersonally (microlevel) occurs in a context that is set by other less obvious influences (macrolevel).

2. Social & Cultural dynamics of power: Women and Men in the society, majority groups and co-cultural groups in a society.

3. Largely unquestioned- Most of the time, those in the majority have greater access to power (e.g., make and revise social rules) because they created these social structures.
III. Technology and Interpersonal Communication

A. Marshall McLuhan:
   1. We are currently living in the electronic age. Beginning with the invention of the telegraph in 1850, electronic inventions have transformed the ways that we live and communicate, such as telephone, television, computer etc.
   2. The electronic media foster the creation of one global village where everyone is linked (directly or indirectly) through technology with everyone else. In the electronic age, close human systems no longer exist.

B. George Gerbner: Television is the dominant force in shaping modern society.
   1. The result of of Gerbner’s research studying the relationship between television viewing and perceptions of reality: People living in a community with little, if any, violence were likely to see their community as more violent than it actually was if they watched a lot of television.
   2. Cultivation Theory: The theory was formed based on the result got from Gerbner’s research. The basic idea of the theory is: the more you watch TV, the more it cultivates or shapes your perceptions of reality.
   3. Accordingly, the ways in which such people communicated with others were influenced by a social paranoia created through and by the media.

C. Stuart Hall: He looks at how the media use their influence to maintain the status quo, through which some cultural groups have power and other do not.
   1. Hegemony is a concept of Hall’s work. It describes situations when one group has predominant influence or domination over another.
   2. Hall does not see the media as a neutral source for information and entertainment. Instead, he believes that media to be a powerful source where certain ideals (e.g., American Dream; the idea that a woman’s value is in her appearance and not her abilities) are sold to the masses.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:
Culture, power and technology

Activity #1
Cultural Dimensions and Barriers Application

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Objective
To allow students to learn basic inter-/cross-cultural differences and be able to apply
cultural dimensions and barriers.

Approximate Time Required
20-25 minutes.

Materials Needed
Students will be provided with handouts of the activity for each group.

What To Do Before The Activity
During the first 20-25 minutes of class, the instructor should give a lecture on how
culture influences interpersonal communication. This information will provide students
mental guidelines for their analysis and selections.

What To Do During The Activity
Divide the class into small groups (preferably 4-5 in each group). Then, randomly
assign a case to each group. Have students read and analyze the case for 10 minutes. After
each group has read and analyzed the case, one member from each group begins to read
the case and the choices aloud before the class. Have the rest of class select and give a
rationale for their choice. Each group needs to explain why each choice is or is not the best
answer. The instructor then reveals the best answer and gives rationale for each choice.
What To Do After The Activity

The instructor must emphasize the goal of the activity to students, which is to understand inter-/cross-cultural differences and identify the cultural dimensions. Ask students to compare and contrast the cultural dimensions investigated in each case. The instructor should also emphasize how all of the choices in each case could be the “answer”, although there is one “best answer” that illustrates how the intercultural misunderstanding had occurred. It is a god idea to ask students if they learned anything new about the culture investigated through these cases. This is a god time to demystify any myths about a culture that may otherwise not be discussed.

Note: Activity based on the idea from, Barbara Hugenberg and Lawrence Hugenberg’s book: Teaching ideas for basic communication course (2005).
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology

Activity #1  
Cultural Dimensions and Barriers Application

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Group #1

1. Read the case below.
2. Read all of the possible choices that help understand the behavior.
3. Chose one best answer that helps understand the behavior.
4. For the discussion, each group need to do the following
   A. Read the case and the choices aloud to the whole class.
   B. Explain why your group chose or didn’t choose each of the possible answer.

“Barely Legal”

Roy, an international student from Singapore, comes to see Barbara Jones, an International student advisor, to inquire about an on-campus summer employment. As Barbara pulls out Roy’s academic record from the computer, she discovers that Roy is currently enrolled below the minimum limit of being a full-time student. Barbara immediately warns Roy: “Did you know that you are now out-of-status?” Roy asks, “What did you mean?” “You are an illegal now. You can be deported!” Barbara adds with an angry tone in her voice. Roy finally explains to Barbara that he had to drop calculus because he was doing poorly in the class. Despite Roy’s explanation, Barbara continues to tell Roy that he can be deported back to Singapore. After that conversation, Roy feels badly about himself, leaves the office, and does not intend to return to see Barbara again.

What caused Roy to not want to see Barbara again?

1. Raising Barbara’s voice during the conversation offended Roy.
2. Roy felt that Barbara blames him for becoming out-of-status.
3. Barbara humiliated Roy by confronting him about his immigration status.
4. Roy was scared that Barbara will report him to the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USBCIS) for deportation.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:
Culture, power and technology

Activity #1

Cultural Dimensions and Barriers Application

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Group # 2

1. Read the case below.
2. Read all of the possible choices that help understand the behavior.
3. Chose one best answer that helps understand the behavior.
4. For the discussion, each group need to do the following
   a. Read the case and the choices aloud to the whole class.
   b. Explain why your group chose or didn’t choose each of the possible answer.

“TV Dinner”

Phil, an American, invites his Filipino co-worker, Pedro, for a dinner at his family’s house. As the foods are being served, Pedro is surprised to find out that Phil and his family eats dinner in the living room in front of the television. Pedro feels uneasy about this, and Phil realizes that he is receiving “dirty looks” from Pedro. Why is Pedro feeling uneasy about where Phil’s family is eating their dinner?

1. It is not a Filipino cultural norm for families to eat in the living room.
2. Pedro thinks that Phil’s family is “too casual.”
3. Pedro feels that the TV show they are watching is “inappropriate.”
4. Pedro thinks that microwavable foods should not be served when guests are invited for dinner.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology  

Activity #1  
Cultural Dimensions and Barriers Application  

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Group # 3  

1. Read the case below.  
2. Read all of the possible choices that help understand the behavior.  
3. Chose one best answer that helps understand the behavior.  
4. For the discussion, each group need to do the following  
   a. Read the case and the choices aloud to the whole class.  
   b. Explain why your group chose or didn’t choose each of the possible answer.

“Stay There”  

At a cocktail party, Waheed, a Kuwaiti, approaches Kendra, a Canadian business investor. Waheed proposes to Kendra his invention of the Smart Clip and tells her how it will revolutionize the way business people organize their paperwork. At time goes on, Waheed stands closer to Kendra, while Kendra steps back. At one point during the conversation, Kendra tells Waheed that she needs to be excused to get a drink. Several minutes later, Kendra fails to return to talk to Waheed. Several days later, Waheed learnt from a friend that Kendra said she don’t want to do business with Waheed. What resulted in Kendra leaving Waheed at the party and refusing to cooperate with Waheed?

1. Waheed's garlic breath is bothering Kendra.  
2. It is getting late, so Kendra thinks that it is best to make an excuse to get a drink in order to leave the party.  
3. Kendra is not interested in Waheed’s business proposal.  
4. Waheed is violating Kendra’s space.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication: 
Culture, power and technology 

Activity #1 
Cultural Dimensions and Barriers Application 

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Group # 4  

1. Read the case below. 
2. Read all of the possible choices that help understand the behavior. 
3. Chose one best answer that helps understand the behavior. 
4. For the discussion, each group need to do the following 
   a. Read the case and the choices aloud to the whole class. 
   b. Explain why your group chose or didn’t choose each of the possible answer. 

“Kenyan Public Speaking”

Jack, a White American foreign exchange college student, visits a Kenyan village to talk to them about the AIDS Epidemic. As a seasoned public speaker and having done a lot of research on the AIDS epidemic in Africa, Jack is obviously qualified to give a presentation on this topic. Jack is dressed in a business suit, nicely groomed, and confident about the presentation. However, Jack notices that his Kenyan audience does not even want to listen to him; they are all inattentive and are not interested at all with what he is saying. What is the reason behind Jack’s audience reluctance to listen to him? 

1. Jack is too formal with his attire in front of the Kenyan village. 
2. Jack does not provide enough eye contact with his audience. 
3. Jack is too young to be knowledgeable about a complex topic as AIDS. 
4. The Kenyans feel offended that another White guy like Jack is giving a speech to them.
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology

Activity #2

Facework With Facebook

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Objective

Utilizing a popular student communication domain known as Facebook (www.facebook.com), this activity allows students to understand how technology influences interpersonal communication.

Approximate Time Required

The first part of the activity needs to be conducted by the students outside of class, will take approximately 20 minutes (This should be the homework of last lesson). The second part of the activity, which takes places in class, requires 20-30 minutes for group and class discussion.

Materials Needed

Participation in this activity requires that each student in the class have a Facebook profile. Due to the popularity of the site among today’s American college population, you will discover that the majority of your students already have a profile. However, for those who do not, registration requires only a university-affiliated (.edu) email address. Upon introducing the activity, a handout with questions will be given to students.

What To Do Before The Activity

During the first 25 minutes of the class, the teacher should give a lecture on how power and technology influence our daily communication. The information will provide mental guidelines for their thought processes. Prior to the activity, all students are required to register with and create a profile on Facebook, if they are not already Facebook members.
What To Do During The Activity

Assign students to small groups of 4-5 people, and ask them to exchange names so that they can look on another up on Facebook to complete the handout.

What To Do After The Activity

After having students complete the activity outside of class and the lecture on the influence of power and technology on interpersonal communication, the rest of in-class time is spent using activity findings to foster group and class discussion. In their small groups, ask students to discuss their findings, sharing the impressions and perceptions they gleaned from accessing one another’s Facebook profiles. Specifically, ask them to consider the following discussion questions:

1. Were you impressions and perceptions of your group members accurate?
2. Do you think that the Facebook profiles reflect or communicate your group members’ identities? Do you think that your Facebook profiles communicated your identity? Why or why not?
3. How would you alter your profile if you knew that different types of people were looking at it? Such as your friends, parents, relatives, professors, future employers. Would you alter it at all?
4. What are the consequences, if any, of the way(s) one represents oneself in an online forum such as Facebook? For instance, what is its influence on your relationship with your friends?

Note: Activity based on the idea from, Barbara Hugenberg and Lawrence Hugenberg’s book: Teaching ideas for basic communication course (2005).
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication: 
Culture, power and technology

Activity #2

Facework With Facebook

Register with and create a profile on Facebook (www.facebook.com), if you are not already Facebook members. Look at your group members’ profile and answer the questions below:

Group member 1:
1. What does his/her Facebook communicate?
2. Base on his/her profile, what impressions do you have about this person?

Group member 2:
1. What does his/her Facebook communicate?
2. Base on his/her profile, what impressions do you have about this person?
Group member 3:

1. What does his/her Facebook communicate?

2. Base on his/her profile, what impressions do you have about this person?

Group member 4:

1. What does his/her Facebook communicate?

2. Base on his/her profile, what impressions do you have about this person?
Factors That Influence Interpersonal Communication:  
Culture, power and technology

TEST

I. Multiple Choices

_____ 1. All of the following are characteristics of culture EXCEPT:

   A. Culture is learned through communication.
   B. Culture is comprised of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, values that are shared by a group of people.
   C. Culture is unchanging.
   D. We make sense of the world through our cultural perspective.

_____ 2. The term used to describe the overlap of cultural experiences between two persons is ________.

   A. synergy    C. hegemony
   B. ethnicity    D. homophily

_____ 3. McLuhan’s research suggests that __________ has shaped all aspects of human history and activities.

   A. technology    C. culture
   B. gender    D. family

_____ 4. A perspective on power that views power as something generated and owned by all is ________.

   A. empowerment    C. dominance
   B. synergy    D. politics

_____ 5. The term hegemony refers to:

   A. The more one watches TV, the more one is influenced by it.
   B. Situations in which all groups share power.
   C. Situations in which one group is predominant over another.
   D. The influence of technology on our daily interactions.
II. Short Answer Questions.

1. Identify one of your important interpersonal relationships. Consider how that relationship might be different if you and your partner adopted values and norms that were opposite from the ones you already hold. For example, if you communication is low context, how would things be different if you shifted to a high-context style?

2. Out of those barriers of communication, what do you feel is your biggest barrier to overcome? Why?

3. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of technology on interpersonal communication.

III. Essay Question.

Focusing on your most common “standpoint” or cultural identity, reflect and analyze the macro level understanding of power for his standpoint. Then, focusing on a particular interpersonal relationship that you have, briefly describe the relationship and discuss the microlevel power you have within this relationship. Be sure to support your claims with examples.
Key to the Multiple Choices of the Test

1. All of the following are characteristics of culture EXCEPT:
   A. Culture is learned through communication.
   B. Culture is comprised of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, values that are
      shared by a group of people.
   C. Culture is unchanging.
   D. We make sense of the world through our cultural perspective.

2. The term used to describe the overlap of cultural experiences between two
   persons is _________.
   A. synergy
   B. ethnicity
   C. hegemony
   D. homophily

3. McLuhan’s research suggests that __________ has shaped all aspects
   of human history and activities.
   A. technology
   B. gender
   C. culture
   D. family

4. A perspective on power that views power as something generated and owned
   by all is ___________.
   A. empowerment
   B. synergy
   C. dominance
   D. politics

5. The term *hegemony* refers to:
   A. The more one watches TV, the more one is influenced by it.
   B. Situations in which all groups share power.
   C. **Situations in which one group is predominant over another**.
   D. The influence of technology on our daily interactions.
Resources

Culture


Power & Technology


References


