

Intercultural Misunderstanding in South Africa: An Analysis of Nonverbal Communication Behaviour in Context

Cynthia Danisile NTULI
University of South Africa, South Africa

Abstract: Communication does not occur in a void; people always communicate within a situation or setting (Steinberg, 1994). As human beings, we use language, i.e., verbal and nonverbal signals to communicate and interact with one another and to link us to the world. Much of what we do when we interact with others is based on our cultural values and background. In this interaction we often encounter people who not only use different languages but who also come from cultures and backgrounds different from ours. Because of our differences, misunderstandings may occur in the process of communication and this may have a negative effect on people around us. The discussion will commence by explaining nonverbal communication and by providing an overview of recent South African history. A deliberation on nonverbal behavioural aspects pertaining to Africans will follow. Lastly, a scenario will be used to demonstrate how a lack of understanding of other people's culture and non-verbal gestures can cause misunderstandings.

Keywords: African culture, communication, ubuntu, nonverbal cues, conflict, intercultural misunderstanding, cultural differences, Western culture, bereavement

1. Introduction

As human beings, we communicate and interact with one another through language, constituted by verbal and nonverbal cues. Much of our gestures when we interact with others are based on our cultural values and backgrounds. Intercultural communication is about interacting with others from cultures different from ours. Explaining how culture is attained, Bassis, Gelles and Levine (1991) observe that: "Culture itself is passed from one generation to the next through socialisation – through children's stories and games, poems, religious rituals, jokes and other learning activities" (p. 66). This means simply that one's culture is learnt from one's own people and this in itself is the difference found in various cultures. Hall & Hall (1990) sum this up when they note that culture is "a program of behaviour" (p. xiv).

The content of different cultures varies but the basic structure of culture is universal as every culture comprises main elements such as beliefs, values, norms, symbols and language (Bassis et al., 1991). These elements show that culture is indeed part of communication. Communication is regarded as the transmission of a message from one person to another and the interpretation of meaning. Communication does not occur in a void but within a certain context. According to O'Sullivan et al. (1994), communication is a process of "negotiation and exchange of meaning in which messages, 'people-in-cultures' and 'reality' interact as to enable meaning to be produced or understanding to occur" (p. 50). People always communicate within a situation or setting (Steinberg, 1994).

In our interactions, we sometimes come across people who not only use different nonverbal cues and speak different languages from ours but who also come from cultures and backgrounds which are different. Because of our differences, misunderstandings may occur in the process of communication and this may have a negative effect on the people around us. Anderson, Helcht, Hoobler & Smallwood (2002) highlight this fact when they point out that:

Intercultural interactions are always problematic. Linguistic barriers in many intercultural transactions are compounded by differences in nonverbal behaviour (p. 90).

The aim of this article is to highlight aspects of intercultural communication and illustrate how a lack of understanding of other people's culture and nonverbal behaviours can cause misunderstandings and even conflict. This research will show the importance of understanding, respecting, acknowledging diversity and learning other people's culture other than one's own. The discussion will commence by explaining nonverbal communication and by providing an overview of recent South African history. A deliberation on nonverbal behavioural aspects pertaining to Africans will follow. Lastly, a constructed scenario will be used to demonstrate how a lack of understanding of other people's culture and non-verbal gestures can cause misunderstandings.

The scenario, like literature, is a reflection of reality, and it portrays some of the actions that have been drawn from real life experiences within the South African society. The scenario is used to demonstrate how in the South African context, misunderstanding can occur between people from different backgrounds and cultures. It will mainly be used to highlight the effects and results of the misinterpretation of nonverbal signs and ignorance about other people. For the purpose of the discussion, the scenario is divided into two parts to depict different types of cultures, settings and people. It will be contextualised by briefly explaining the South African social situation that existed during and after the apartheid era. Each part of the scenario is followed by a discussion.

2. Nonverbal Communication and Culture

Humans use various methods of communicating and these have a lot to do with cultural norms. During intercultural interaction, messages are communicated. These messages may be conveyed both verbally and nonverbally. Each culture uses nonverbal gestures which may differ from those of other cultures (Bo-Yuen Ngai, 2000). According to Henslin (2010), "Gestures are movements of the body to communicate with or in the presence of others" (p.4). Nonverbal gesticulation forms part of communicative behaviour and includes body language such as facial expressions like smiling, frowning, eye contact or different types of physical gestures. Lustig and Koester (2003) explain that nonverbal behaviour can become part of the communication process:

[...] when someone intentionally tries to convey a message or when someone attributes meaning to the nonverbal behaviour of another, whether or not the person intended to communicate a particular meaning. (p. 176)

The truth of this quotation will become evident during the examination of the scenario where some behavioural forms of politeness and respect that are acceptable in African culture, will be explained. These pertain mostly to gestures used in nonverbal communication.

Burgoon, Buller and Woodall (1996), make an interesting and valid point when they remark that “Nonverbal communication can lead to misunderstanding as well as understanding” (p. 5). This is true because misunderstandings and understandings are enacted or manifest themselves in various situations in our communities and mostly mirror the cultures from which people come. However, this article will focus mainly on the misunderstandings caused by nonverbal communication.

This article highlights how, in the South African context, a lack of understanding of other people’s culture, language and gestures may sometimes cause unnecessary conflict. This will be achieved by examining the behaviour of individuals in the case scenario. The discussion of these misunderstandings will be based on Anderson, Hecht, Hoobler & Smallwood. (2002 premise that:

Cultural differences are not random events; they occur because cultures develop with different geographies, climates, economies, religions and histories, each exerting unique influence (p. 90).

Nonverbal communication plays a dominant role in the life of Africans. Much as the following nonverbal behaviours may be acceptable in some cultures, in traditional African communities, they are frowned upon: beckoning to someone, pointing at someone with one finger, looking someone straight in the eye, passing things, especially food, with the left hand and so on are unacceptable. Most forms of nonverbal communication can be interpreted within the framework of the culture in which they occur. Cultures differ in specific enacted behaviours, movements, posture, vocal intonations and gestures; even dances are specific to a particular culture (Lustig & Koester, 2003).

3. A Brief Overview of the South African Situation

During the Apartheid era, South Africans were racially divided. Because of the political situation, racial groups were forced to live in segregated areas; added to this, the differences in cultural background meant that people behaved and did things differently. The freedom from these political restrictions in 1994 ushered in a number of changes and shifts in the population: Africans were free to live anywhere they pleased in the country and in addition some who had fled the country for political reasons returned to their new and liberated country. Although freedom came as a gift to all the citizens of South Africa, it also brought with it some new challenges.

Because of the segregation prior to 1994, people often did not make the effort to learn about one another. Whites lived in affluent suburban areas whilst Africans lived in rural areas and in urban townships which were often a few kilometres from towns. Although blacks were in the majority, whites were wealthier and had the political power. Africans had to learn to speak

the languages of the whites and as a result many whites believed themselves to be superior. The master and servant relationship prevailed. Many white employers demanded respect from their employees, irrespective of their age, insisting they call them “sir” or “boss”, while they addressed their employees in derogatory terms, calling them “boys” and “girls”. This was not only demeaning and impolite but also showed a lack of respect for other people’s culture, especially that of married men and women. Owing to the many changes in the country, people who were concerned only for themselves and who had never bothered to find out about others, often found themselves in conflict situations arising from their lack of understanding of the culture of others.

Some white employers in South Africa still find it difficult to understand why their African employees avoid looking them straight in the eye during a conversation. Some may infer that this indicates that the employee has something to hide. What they do not understand is that from an African cultural perspective, particularly in the remote rural communities, it is regarded as disrespectful to gaze at someone if he or she is of a higher status. It is also impolite to look senior persons in the eyes when speaking to them. This form of respect is inculcated in children from an early age and it is a way of life as they see it being practised by their mothers to their fathers. Children also witness this among their elder brothers and sisters.

Another behavioural form of respect is standing and sitting down. Young persons, because of their age, do not remain standing in the middle of a room in the presence of elders. This is regarded as impolite. Many Africans who still practise their culture sit down before they engage in any form of conversation. In some traditional settings, females are sometimes expected to kneel and men to squat when conversing with their elders. Girls are taught from a tender age to sit properly. Girls and women do not sit like men. When sitting on a chair, legs are brought together so as not to expose the inner part of the thighs. It is also unacceptable for females to sit on the floor with crossed legs, unlike in some cultures. In Western culture, on the other hand, people first have to be offered a seat before they can sit down. It is sad to observe that some Africans no longer practise their culture, and they have adopted the Western ways of doing things.

The use of the left hand when taking food or an object from someone else is also regarded as a sign of disrespect. A person should either use both hands or the right hand to support the left one. The receiving of objects is sometimes followed by a curtsy. It is also unacceptable for children to put their hands in their pockets during a conversation with adults or when interacting with their parents or with those of higher status. Beckoning to someone is another nonverbal gesture that is regarded inappropriate in African culture. However, this is acceptable in Western culture in some circumstances.

4. Scenario

This section presents a scenario which has been divided into two parts. The scenario will portray how misunderstandings can be caused by the misinterpretations of other people’s nonverbal signs and by different people’s ignorance about one another’s cultures.

Part 1

Manqoba is a young man from the deep rural KwaZulu-Natal area. He has just befriended Michael. Michael's family has just returned to South Africa, his parents having moved to America when he was a toddler. Manqoba has invited Michael to pay him a visit. Michael is excited and looking forward to meeting his new friend's family.

One Friday afternoon Michael arrives at Manqoba's home. The door is opened by Mrs Mthembu, Manqoba's mother. After greeting him in Zulu, she extends a hand to him but with a smile Michael says, "Hi, Lizzy!" and attempts to embrace her. Mrs Mthembu steps back, shocked. She tells him to take a seat and goes out to call Manqoba. On her return to inform Michael that Manqoba will soon be with him, she finds him standing in the middle of the room with his hands in his pockets. Mrs Mthembu appears to be annoyed by this. Manqoba arrives just as his mother is about to leave the room. She says to her son in Zulu, "*Umgane wakho akahloniphi, kungani angahlali phansi? Ngiyabona ukuthi akafundiswanga kahle.*" (Your friend doesn't have respect, why doesn't he take a seat? I can see that he has not been well brought up.) Manqoba just smiles, hugs his friend and offers him a seat. As they are talking, Mr Mthembu comes rushing in, and angrily calls Manqoba. He confronts him about his friend's lack of respect in attempting to hug his wife. Manqoba pleads with his father and tries to explain Michael's background. Mr Mthembu smiles and seems to understand the situation as it dawns upon him that his son's friend does not understand what he is saying. He slowly approaches Michael with a smile, extending a hand in greeting and says, "I'm sorry, my child, I thought you were being disrespectful to my family. I did not know that you are from America, and that you do not know anything about our culture. We welcome you." As Manqoba tries to explain to Michael, Manqoba's sister comes in with a tray of food for their new visitor. Once the air has been cleared, Manqoba and his friend suppress their laughter and eat the food. Michael asks some questions and Manqoba explains some things about their culture. Later on, he invites him to join them in witnessing the burial of a relative that will be taking place the following day.

4.1 Analysis of Part 1

The brief explanation of nonverbal behaviour provided above, indicates that nonverbal behaviour and gestures cannot be easily separated from a person's culture and socialisation. Hadert, Parker, Pfuhl and Anderson (1974, p.75) define socialisation as "The process of building group, cultural, and contra cultural values into individuals." This becomes apparent from the manner in which Michael behaves and the unexpected negative response this elicits in the new environment in which he finds himself. His well intentioned gesture of hugging Mrs Mthembu in greeting is not favourably received. This is a result of cultural differences and diverse backgrounds, lack of knowledge of the culture and behavioural practices of others and of the age gap. Mrs Mthembu seems shocked to be called by name and to be embraced by a young African man; instead, he ought to have extended his hand to her.

Greeting by extending a hand, although this is a foreign act among the Africans, has since been accepted in the society. As a result, Mrs Mthembu extended her hand to Manqoba's friend as a form of greeting. However, an embrace was too foreign to her because she lives in the rural areas and is not accustomed to this type of nonverbal communicative behaviour. This form of greeting is not accepted among some Africans, especially those who live in traditional rural areas. It is not part of African culture for parents to show their love to their grown-up children by hugging or kissing them. This form of greeting is therefore perceived as foreign to them and unlike extending a hand; it is sometimes viewed by others as too intimate to be used between people of the opposite sex as it also does not allow the keeping of the reasonable distance among strangers. It is thus easy to see why Mr and Mrs Mthembu's first reaction towards their son's new friend was held with disgust and suspicion. They are steeped in culture and not yet acquainted with and unaccepting of other people's ways of doing things in the new and free South Africa. This is seen from Mrs Mthembu's following remarks: "Your friend doesn't have respect ... I can see that he has not been well brought up." Her exasperation depicts a clash of cultures because Michael was probably not aware that he was being disrespectful, he was merely expressing his excitement to be in his birth place and to meet one of his new friend's parents. On the other hand, although Mr Mthembu's response in confronting Michael could be perceived as a bit harsh and intimidating, he did not do it on purpose. He was reacting according to the way he was brought up. In African culture any parent or an elderly person is free to teach, advise, reprimand or punish a child when he/she has misbehaved, even if he/she is not the parent of the child. It is for that reason that in African culture words like stepfather, stepmother, stepsister and stepbrother do not exist. Furthermore, as an African man, Mr Mthembu is bound to protect his family, particularly when it comes to the rescue of his wife and children from any form of perceived danger.

Being called by name by children and hugged by strangers does not form part of Mrs Mthembu's culture. According to African culture, any person who is older than you should be addressed as *mama* "mother" or *baba* "father", *mkhulu* "grandfather" or *gogo* "grandmother". Michael's case makes us aware that people from different cultures sometimes communicate and behave differently because of their lack of cultural awareness. On the other hand, Michael's way of greeting would not have been frowned upon or caused such a scene had he hugged an urban African woman from the communities or townships where some cultural practices are less practised or are no longer taken into consideration.

To add insult to injury, Michael not only causes conflict by embracing a married woman, but his verbal communication betrays his lack of understanding of the African forms of greeting. This is demonstrated when he excludes the word "mother" and says only, "Hi, Lizzy". Mrs Mthembu's annoyance is exacerbated when she sees Michael standing in the middle of the room instead of sitting down as is expected in her culture.

What she sees she subsequently interprets as inappropriate behaviour and a lack of respect. Her sentiments are conveyed by the use of both verbal and nonverbal cues: "Your friend has no respect, why doesn't he take a seat?" On the other hand, Michael is unaware that he has done anything wrong as he has not intentionally shown disrespect for the Mthembu family. He behaves in a way that is normal for him, in accordance with the norms and habits of where he comes from. As a result, misunderstandings arise, leading to a confrontation with Mr

Mthembu, who thinks Michael should be taught a lesson. Their cultural differences and lack of understanding of one another's nonverbal behaviour play a role in this misunderstanding. Kim (1988) elaborates on the influence that culture can have on an individual's behaviour:

Culture is viewed in most of the present theories as not limited to the life patterns of conventionally recognizable cultural groups such as national, ethnic, or racial groups. Instead, it is viewed as potentially open to all levels of groups whose life patterns discernibly influence individual communication behaviors (pp. 12-13).

Standing in the room whereas one has been ordered to sit down is frowned upon in the African culture. It is regarded as a form of disrespect. Furthermore, putting one's hands in the pockets in a host's house is also unacceptable, especially if a person is a visitor and a young person for that matter. Manqoba is not too perturbed by this. He smiles at his mother's reaction, for he is aware that she is not acquainted with the Western ways and that his friend is also unfamiliar with their customs. In the scenario, it is witnessed that Michael's innocent actions have unwittingly caused unnecessary tension. All these were the result of the lack of the knowledge about intercultural relationships and the context and place under which certain nonverbal signs should be applied.

After Manqoba has pleaded and explained Michael's background to his father, the tension is seen being ironed out by Mr Mthembu's smile. This explanation is magical, for it plays a major role in explaining the cause of misunderstandings that have taken place and in bringing a mutual understanding between people who come from different worlds with different cultures, backgrounds and language. Consequently, the smile could be interpreted as a sign that has brought about understanding, peace and acceptance between the Mthembu family and Michael. Mr and Mrs Mthembu have been made aware that Michael is not steeped in his roots and as such, is ignorant of his African culture. On the other hand, unlike their son, Michael's parents still practice their traditional culture and are also a bit ignorant of the Western customs.

Part 2

On the following morning, the Mthembu family and Michael go to the suburbs to attend the funeral. As they approach the home of the deceased, Michael is surprised to see that so many people have come to pay their last respects. He notices that some women are cooking food in huge pots inside the yard.

After driving around and finding no space to park, they park their car on the lawn of one of their relative's neighbours. Almost immediately, a seething Mr Grobler approaches Mr Mthembu, the driver of the car; points and shouts at him in Afrikaans, telling him to move his car from his premises as he has no permission to park there. Mthembu seems surprised by Grobler's outburst; he walks slowly towards him, takes off his hat and tries to explain politely to Mr Grobler that there is no other space to park and that he should help them as they have come to pay their last respects to one of their relatives. He continues: "We are sorry, sir, but could you please try to be neighbourly

and help us? Remember that according to our culture of *ubuntu*, a person is what he is because of others.” Mr Grobler is adamant and threatens to call the police because they are invading his privacy. “*Wat is dit and wie is jy? Jy moet my nie van jou kultuur leer nie, dis my eie plek dié!*” (What is that and who are you? Don’t teach me about your culture! This is my place!), he shouts at Mr Mthembu. At that moment the man’s wife comes out, looking rather timid and begs her husband to calm down: “*Asseblief tog, my liefie, los hulle uit, net vir vandag, ons wil nie probleme hê nie.*” (Please, love, leave them alone, just for today, we do not want problems). The man grimaces and reluctantly retreats, saying, “Remember to inform me beforehand next time, otherwise there will be trouble!” He points at the crowd with his finger. On seeing this, some people in the crowd become very cross, they raise their fists and shouts back at him in protest. However, a relieved Mr Mthembu put his hands together and says, “*Baie dankie, meneer!*” (Thank you very much, sir). On seeing this, Michael scratches his head, his face showing both confusion and surprise (Ntuli and Masuku, 2008).

4.2 Analysis of Part 2

Funerals and other ceremonies like these play an important role in the lives of Africans. Families, friends, colleagues and neighbours open their hearts and help in whatever way they can (Ntuli & Masuku, 2008).

During the period of bereavement neighbours and friends will open their houses to the people who have come to pay their last respects. In most instances, a cordial relationship exists between people in the vicinity of the bereaved family. One has to be seen to care about other people’s pain. Neighbours will spend days with the bereaved, taking care of their needs, cooking, welcoming the mourners and even offering a place to sleep to those who have come from far away (Ntuli & Masuku, 2008). That is why Mr Mthembu saw nothing wrong in parking his car on the lawn of his relative’s neighbours. According to him, the neighbour would not object because from his African orientation it was a sign of *ubuntu* to open one’s heart to those who are facing hardships. Ntuli and Masuku (2008) underscore this when they observe:

By exercising *ubuntu*, one humbles oneself by opening one’s heart to the needs of other people, for example, the mourners may not ask for the neighbour’s permission to park their cars in front of his/her gate if attending the funeral in the vicinity. This is not intended to be a sign of disrespect or arrogance, but it is normally assumed that you are part of the community and so your home is their home too in times like these (p. 40).

From the scenario, it is apparent that the conflict that erupted between Mr Mthembu and Mr Grobler arose from their different social backgrounds and from cultural and linguistic differences. Mr Grobler’s behaviour seems disrespectful, hostile and inconsiderate to others. He seems to represent some of the white communities, and in this case, the Afrikaans community who are seen to be individualistic and who do not care much about others. On the other hand, Mr Mthembu and his fellow brothers and sisters represent and uphold the interdependent nature of African culture whose belief is in sharing and helping one another. However, it is apparent

that Mr Grobler was not aware of the culture of *ubuntu* that runs like a golden thread among the Africans. Had he known, he probably would not have come to Mr Mthembu seething. In addition, Mr Mthembu was not aware that among the whites, the habit of mutual sharing does not exist or that it does not have the same meaning as that of his people. Had he known, he would have respected Mr Grobler's space and shied away from crossing the boundaries by not parking his car on Mr Grobler's lawn; and as a result, he would not have been surprised by Mr Grobler's negative reaction.

Furthermore, Mr Mthembu is respectful, polite and humble. His act of taking off his hat was an indication that he was being polite and respectful towards Mr Grobler. However, Mr Mthembu's good gesture of politeness and a plea for help demonstrated by the taking off of his hat fuels Mr Grobler's anger as he threatens to get the Mthembu family arrested. He becomes obstinate and even refuses to listen to the voice of reason about the culture of *ubuntu*. Instead he shouts, "Don't teach me about your culture! This is my place!" His response inadvertently alludes to his individualist nature and a lack of understanding of other people's culture.

Despite all the misunderstandings that have already been experienced by both parties, Mr Grobler should be forgiven for his reaction, for had he been informed on time, he would have probably understood and reacted differently. It is thus a bit unfair for Mr Mthembu to give Mr Grobler a 'crash course' about the spirit of *ubuntu*, a concept and a culture which is foreign to him. This is so when one considers that learning about other people's cultures is a process and cannot be forced upon other people. It has to be decided of a person's own volition.

From an African perspective, Mr Grobler's communicative behaviour towards his neighbour's relatives is further viewed in a negative light. It is seen as rude, inappropriate and shows a lack of empathy and understanding of other people's culture. This is demonstrated when he points a finger and shouts at Mr Mthembu without bothering to greet him. In Mr Grobler's case, this probably has its roots in the apartheid regime where black South Africans were treated as inferior, and it also mirrors the pre-existing tensions and negative views and attitudes that people from different races in South Africa, have towards one another. His superiority complex is evident when he addresses them in Afrikaans, whilst Mr Mthembu makes an effort to speak to him in both English and Afrikaans. Under the circumstances, Mr Grobler should have restrained himself and shown some understanding of the situation; instead, he portrayed a bossy and impersonal attitude, especially after Mr Mthembu had apologised to him about parking on his lawn.

Furthermore, Mr Grobler's ignorance about the non-acceptable nonverbal behaviours amongst the Africans, almost inflamed the situation when he pointed at the crowd who immediately reacted negatively. The crowd showed a dislike of the use of the nonverbal sign because they knew that pointing a finger to an adult or adults is regarded as rude and disrespectful. It makes people feel that they are being treated like children. Thanks to his wife who discerned the situation and begged him to succumb, he changed his mind. Unlike her husband, Mrs Grobler, although she was pushed by fear, showed some empathy to their neighbour's relatives and understanding of the whole situation. Mr Grobler's change of mind was followed by another nonverbal sign, from Mr Mthembu, of showing respect, politeness and appreciation to Mr Grobler. This is witnessed when he puts his hands together to show his gratitude and appreciation.

Mr Grobler's misunderstanding of the behaviour of the people attending the funeral arises from the fact that he is unfamiliar with his neighbour's culture and funeral practices. His reaction is interpreted based on his cultural background where, in the white community, the burying of a loved one tends to be attended by family members and friends only. The Mthembu family, on the other hand, acted according to their cultural background of interdependence and as such forgot to consider that they were at a different community which had its own ways of doing things. Had both families, coming from different cultures, bothered to interact and know one another better, the misunderstanding and the conflict would not have taken place. All this shows that as South African citizens, we should continue to draw from the history of our liberated country the spirit of the unshackling of our past ignorance about one another. We should strive to better understand, tolerate and respect one another's cultures and differences.

5. Conclusion

This article began by describing intercultural communication as a form of communication that takes place between people from diverse cultures. It explained the link that exists between communication, language, gestures, culture and the background from which people come. It also illustrated how the ignorance of other people's culture and the wrong use of nonverbal signals can be misread, and as a result, generate different interpretations and cause unnecessary misunderstandings and conflicts. The discussion was preceded by a brief explanation of the South African context to facilitate an understanding of the scenario that formed the springboard of the discussion. The scenario provided an example of some of the challenges of living in an intercultural society. Furthermore, it underscored the importance of learning, knowing, interacting with other people and respecting their culture in order to reach a mutual understanding.

Through the use of the scenario, this article has demonstrated some of the problems that can occur in a country, particularly, within the South African context, as a result of cross-cultural misunderstandings and ignorance about different people's cultural background. This was evinced by the differences that unfolded during the interactions, with Michael and the Mthembu family and also between the Mthembu's and the Grobler's. The discussion has shown that it is very important for people to be able to be aware and sensitive of other people's cultures, treat each other with respect, respect each other's differences and spaces by not crossing the boundaries, be tolerant, cooperative, and friendly to one another and learn to adapt to circumstances. This final aspect was brilliantly demonstrated by Mrs Grobler who begged her husband to be understanding and allow their neighbour's relatives to park on their lawn. The amicable solution of the problem helped to diffuse a situation which could have got out of control. Finally, Michael's use of nonverbal signals has shown that even though he was an African like the Mthembu family, his ignorance about his African culture could cause serious misunderstandings in different settings. Mr Mthembu's use of nonverbal signals and his knowledge about his cultural background and the influence the *apartheid* era had on his behaviour has also been instrumental in containing an otherwise volatile situation. This was also enforced by his being able to understand Mr Grobler's language, and where his superiority complex emanated from. When taking into consideration the events that took place from the scenario and the results thereof, one is compelled to concur with Itu's (2008) remarks that "How

can we respect each other and live together as friends when we think in terms of superiority and inferiority? There is no place for understanding when arrogance is the attitude towards the other” (p. 63).

References

- Anderson, Peter A.; Hecht, Michael L.; Hoobler, Gregory D. & Smallwood, Maya. (2002). Nonverbal communication across cultures. In Gudykunst, William B. & Mody, Bella (Eds.), *Handbook of international and intercultural communication*, (pp. 89-106). London: Sage Publications.
- Bailey, Benjamin. (2000). Communicative behaviour and conflict between African-American customers and Korean immigrant retailers in Los Angeles. *Discourse and Society*. 11(1), 86-108.
- Bassis, Michael. S.; Gelles, Richard J. & Levine, Ann. (1991). *Sociology: An introduction*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bo-Yuen Ngai, Phyllis. (2000). Nonverbal communicative behaviour in intercultural negotiations: Insights and applications based on findings from Ethiopia, Tanzania, Hong Kong, and the China Mainland. *World Communication*, 29(4) 5-35.
- Burgoon, Judee K.; Buller, David B. & Woodall, William G. (1996). *Nonverbal communication: The unspoken dialogue*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hardert, Ronald A.; Parker, Howard A.; Pfuhl, Erdwin H. & Anderson, William A. (1974). *Sociology & Social Issues*. San Francisco: Rinehart Press.
- Hall, Edward T. & Hall, Reed L. (1990). *Understanding cultural differences*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.
- Henslin, James M. (2010). *Sociology: A down-to-earth approach*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Itu, Mircea. (2008). Intercultural communication: An openness towards the future. *Annals of Spiru Haret University Journalism Studies*. 9, 63-66.
- Kim, Young Y. (1988). On theorizing intercultural communication. In Kim, Young Y. & Gudykunst, William B. (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 11-21). California: Sage Publications.
- Lustig, Myron W. & Koester, Jolene. (2003). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Ntuli, Cynthia D. & Masuku, Norma. (2008). Interpersonal relationships. In Matjila, D.S. *African languages and culture in practice: Only study guide for AFL1502* (pp 27-42). Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- O’ Sullivan, Tim.; Hartley, John.; Saunders, Danny.; Montgomery, Martin & Fiske, John. (1994). *Key concepts in communication and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.
- Steinberg, Sheila. (1994). *Introduction to communication: Course book 1 - the basics*. Cape Town: Juta.
- Wiseman, Richard L. (2002). Intercultural communication competence. In Gudykunst, William B. & Mody, Bella (Eds.), *Handbook of international and intercultural communication* (pp. 207-224). London: Sage Publication.

Author Note

Cynthia Daphne Danisile Ntuli is a senior lecturer of African Languages at the University of South Africa. The author's fields of interest are children's literature and African culture. She completed her doctoral studies in 2011 in the field of children's literature with the thesis entitled *From Oral Performance to Picture Books: A Perspective on Zulu Children's Literature*. The first draft of this article was presented as a paper at the XVII International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS) Conference entitled 'We and the Others in Intercultural Communication' in San Cristobal, Chiapas, Mexico in June 2011. Recent publications include: 'My Eerste Woordboek: Afrikaans, English, Xhosa Zoeloe' (*Lapa Publishers*, 2009), 'The Function of Songs in the Performance of Zulu Folktales' (*Muziki Journal of Music Research in Africa*, 7(2) (November 2010), and 'The Transmission and Reproduction of Folktales with Special Reference to Nanana Bosele' (*Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, 2, 2011). I would like to thank Prof. M.J. Mafela for inviting me to present a paper at the conference.