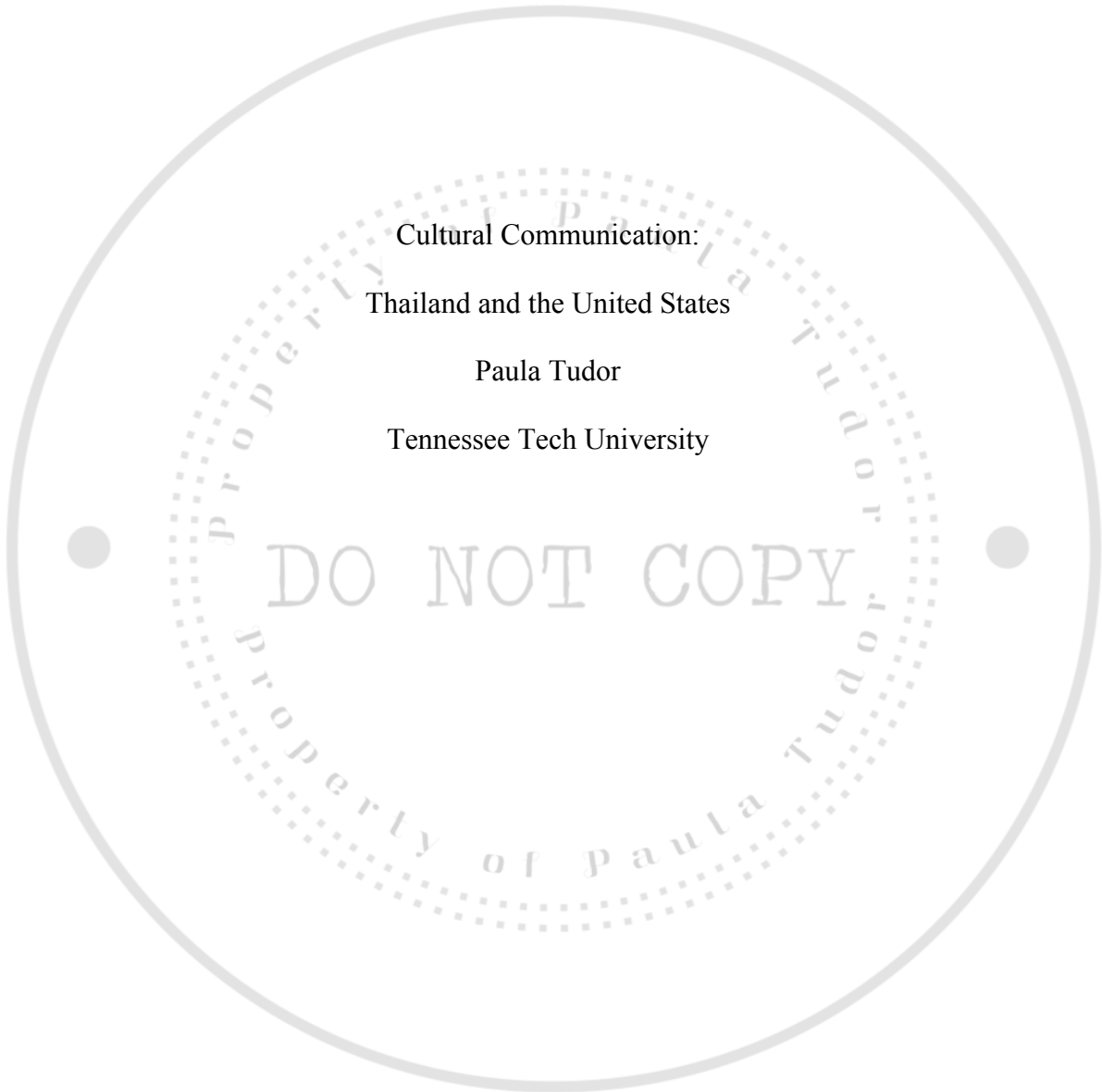


Running head: CULTURAL COMMUNICATION



In every corner of the world, various cultures can be discovered, which all possess their own characteristics, defining qualities that make them unique. These qualities are usually seen in each culture's expression of values, worldviews, and norms for behavior. It is in these expressions that differences between cultures are found, however one only has to take a deeper look to find something familiar in virtually every culture, even if the familiar only exists in what people learn about their own cultures in the process (Hall, 2005).

People in all cultures have values, things they hold dear. These values vary from culture to culture in terms of importance and are usually defined differently in every culture. Honesty, kindness, efficiency, and loyalty are four such values that likely exist to at least some degree in every culture. The difference is in the worth that people place on these values and how they are prioritized in their lives. Thailand and the United States are examples of two places that have vastly different cultures. Certainly no one would dispute the differences that exist in these places. Thailand's culture is largely determined by Buddhism, which is practiced by more than ninety percent of the country's population. The United States, however, is as culturally diverse as the people that occupy it, making it a sort of cultural group all on its own, with values, worldviews, and norms for behavior, just like any other culture. As different as the cultures that define these two places may be, both of them possess the aforementioned values of honesty, kindness, efficiency, and loyalty (Hall, 2005)(“Thailand,” n.d.)(“United States,” n.d.).

Like most of the values in the Thai culture, honesty is motivated by Buddhism and the concept of karma. Many of the people in Thailand believe that what they do in this life is rewarded or punished in the next life accordingly, therefore lying is not looked on favorably. In the United States, honesty is seen as having many different levels and is generally defined more

by the situation, than as something that carries lasting implications. Many Americans believe that it is acceptable to be less than truthful when the situation calls for it, perhaps telling 'white lies,' as a way of protecting someone's feelings. Telling white lies is a norm of behavior within the American culture. It is something that people have adopted over time as a way to avoid being rude. Most people in the United States are of the shared opinion that it is impolite to be completely honest with someone if it has the potential to hurt their feelings or embarrass them. In certain situations, this type of honesty also has the potential to damage relationships. It is out of the need to protect these relationships that likely made certain amounts of dishonesty acceptable to most Americans. In Thai culture, any form of dishonesty, even for the sake of protecting one's feelings, is viewed negatively. While Thai people do not generally advocate forsaking someone's feelings for complete honesty, lying is not acceptable either. While Americans developed the concept of telling white lies, people in Thailand likely use their smile to diffuse those situations where their only choice is either to lie or hurt someone's feelings. It is widely known that Thai people express discomfort, sympathy, and a range of other emotions by smiling, so it is reasonable to assume that smiling is a norm of behavior for escaping those moments when lying seems like the only option ("Discover Asia," n.d.)(Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)("Thailand Land of Smiles," n.d.).

Americans define the value of kindness differently at different times. Although, it is not always practiced in this culture, people generally agree that kindness is something that is expressed to others out of respect for their feelings. At other times kindness is expressed in order to gain something from someone else. Like honesty, kindness in the American culture exists on a scale, the levels of which are determined by the situation and the person expressing it. In the

United States kindness is often associated with common courtesy. People are kind with the expectation that they will be treated kindly in return. This is a norm within the American culture. People express kindness on a daily basis, without giving much thought to the fact that they expect it in return, however it almost never goes unnoticed when kindness is not returned. People simply want to be treated with kindness, particularly if they consider themselves to be kind. No one wants to be held by certain social rules that other people do not follow. Like honesty, the value of kindness in Thailand is rooted in Buddhism and karma. It is seen as something that is expressed, not necessarily to receive it in return, but that will be rewarded either in this life or in another life. For this reason it does not generally exist on scale. The norm in Thailand for the expression of kindness is done through carefully choosing one's words and actions, so that no one will be made to feel uncomfortable. Negative emotions are also kept in check to avoid confrontations. These norms were likely developed in order to control social situations where there is always the potential that someone will get angry or upset. Because kindness is widely regarded as something that will be rewarded, it is possible that they feel the only way to ensure the prevalence of kindness is to maintain a sense of emotional control in every situation ("Discover Asia," n.d.)(Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)("Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions," n.d.)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.).

Whenever efficiency is mentioned in the United States most people think of it in terms of their jobs, or even in their daily lives. Americans typically define efficiency by how well they can do their jobs or daily tasks in the least amount of time. Companies and people alike are constantly looking for new and improved ways of reducing the time and energy it takes to complete certain tasks, without sacrificing quality. People maintain efficiency by having

watches and clocks to keep them on time and on schedule. It is a norm in this country for people to set alarms to notify them when it is time for an appointment or various other tasks. It is also common to see people constantly checking their watches, or keeping an eye on the clock to make sure they are going to be able to complete their daily responsibilities on time. While not everyone in the United States exhibits these norms for maintaining efficiency, it is certainly typical and partially stems out of the way most people in this country view time. People in Thailand likely view efficiency in less personal ways than Americans, in part because they view time differently. They do not have the same inherent need to keep track of time that most Americans do. In Thailand time is used as more of a general guideline for accomplishing tasks, rather than a strict deadline. This is a norm for this culture and is probably influenced by the fact that most of the values that govern behavior in Thailand derive from Buddhism. So efficiency, at least in the way Americans define it, is probably not a highly prioritized value there. Efficiency in Thailand is, instead, probably defined more by good deeds accomplished in an effort to improve one's karma. In terms of the entire country, Thailand is heavily influenced by other countries and cultures for everything from technology to fashion, so it is possible that replicating what has worked for other countries is Thailand's way of maintaining efficiency in their own culture (Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.)(“Thailand Western Culture,” n.d.).

Loyalty, like efficiency, is highly valued in America, but it is not always received. Americans typically see loyalty as something that is given primarily to the people they care about, although many Americans feel a sense of loyalty to their country and their jobs as well. Like honesty and kindness, there are many different levels of loyalty that are dependent on both

the situation and the person expressing it. Because of the different levels involved in loyalty, no two people have the same exact definition of what it means to be loyal, however, when someone feels that their loyalty has not been appreciated they feel betrayed. In America, loyalty is probably most often expressed in terms of people defending their friends and family against defamation. This is seen as a sign of loyalty and is a norm in the American culture for people who are truly loyal. People express their loyalty in this way in part because they need relationships that they can count on with people who will be just as loyal to them. The concept of loyalty in Thailand is much different than it is in the United States. In Thailand loyalty is a value most often expressed for the king and the country itself. In this sense loyalty is not defined in terms of personal relationships, but instead out of a sense of patriotism. Thai culture, unlike American culture, views any derogatory statements pertaining to the country unfavorably. It is also seen as unacceptable to tell jokes about the country or the king in any social setting. This is a norm that probably stems mainly from the concept of karma. Most Thai people believe that a person's social class is directly connected to what kind of person they were in a previous life, and thus deserve respect (Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)("Thailand Land of Smiles," n.d.)("Thailand Western Culture," n.d.).

In addition to values and norms, all cultures possess worldviews, and like values worldviews are determined not only by culture, but by the people within those cultures. All cultures do, however, display general trends toward specific worldviews even if certain people within those cultures differ slightly in where they exist within those worldviews. American culture generally displays an individualistic worldview, whereas Thailand's worldview is more collectivistic. America's individualism is exemplified in their approach to time and efficiency.

Americans tend to have a very linear concept of time, where deadlines are placed in a position of great importance. Thai people, on the other hand, have a different concept of time, and place less importance on deadlines. This is seen in the way that they value efficiency in comparison to kindness and honesty, and the special attention that is placed on honoring those values (“Discover Asia,” n.d.)(Hall, 2005)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions,” n.d.)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.).

Thailand is also ascription oriented. This is primarily guided by the concept of karma and the belief that people’s social status is directly linked with a person’s character in a former life. This worldview can also be used to explain the belief that a person’s social status can improve in the next life provided that they earn enough good karma in this life. American culture on the other hand, is based in the achievement worldview, where people’s social status can improve provided they work hard enough. This helps to explain the importance that is placed on efficiency in this culture (Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions,” n.d.).

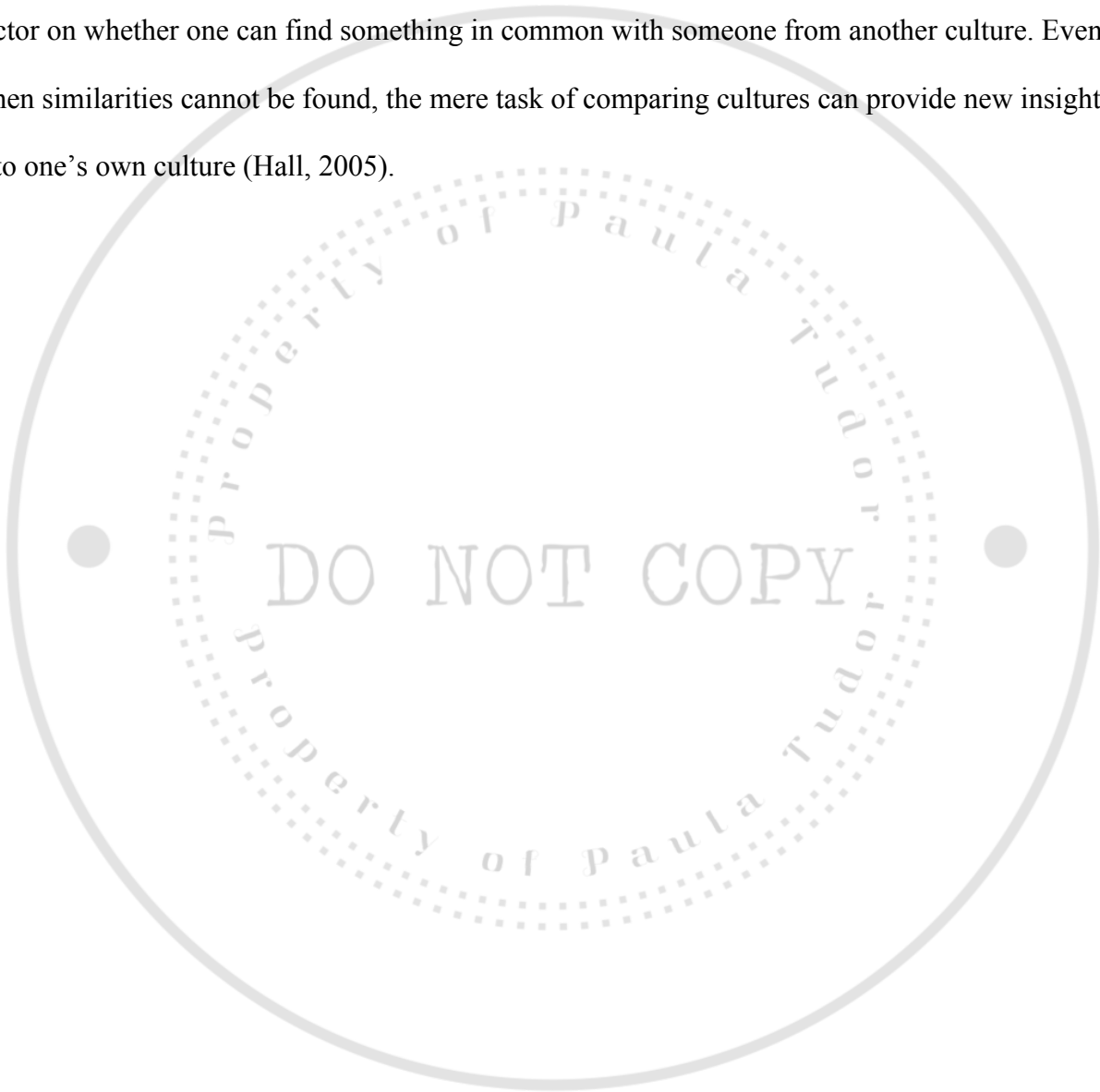
The communication in American culture operates mainly in low context. People in this culture tend to use their words to clearly express their thoughts and ideas. In fact, lapses in communication are often blamed on the fact that someone did not explain themselves clearly enough. In Thailand people tend to communicate in high context. A lot of attention is paid to a person’s body language and social status, and this is used to determine a person’s character and relative position in society. Their high context culture can also be seen in the way they use their smile to communicate different emotions in different situations (Hall, 2005)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions,” n.d.)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.).

Both of these cultures tend to view language differently as well. While people in Thailand view language as a social lubricant, Americans think of language as primarily informative. Americans tend to use language to send and receive information. Emphasis is placed on the informative aspect of language to ensure that communication is clear and concise, which helps promote efficiency. Thai culture, however, places more importance on language as a social lubricant. This can be seen in their efforts to express kindness and maintain honesty. Thai people tend to choose their words carefully to avoid any form of lying, and are careful in how they use language in the interest of being kind (“Discover Asia,” n.d.)(Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions,” n.d.)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.)(“Thailand Western Culture,” n.d.).

American culture also differs from Thai culture in terms of the structure of their societies. American culture is primarily grounded in an egalitarian system, where everyone is considered equal. Thai culture is based in a system of hierarchy, where everyone is assigned a certain social status. People who are considered to be in positions of high authority are respected and revered. Again, this is largely due to the concept of karma and the belief that one’s position in society reflects their character in a former life. This is also why it is not seen as acceptable to speak ill of people in these positions. Because American culture is based in an egalitarian system, speaking ill of people in powerful positions is more socially acceptable than it is in Thailand (Hall, 2005)(Harvey, 2000)(Kislenko, 2004)(“Kwintessential Cross Cultural Solutions,” n.d.)(“Thailand,” n.d.)(“Thailand Land of Smiles,” n.d.)(“Thailand Western Culture,” n.d.).

While all cultures are different, and each certainly holds their own unique expressions of values, norm, and worldviews, similarities, even in the smallest form do exist. The people that

make up these cultures are always growing and changing and cannot be defined by their respective cultures. The way people express their culture's values, norms, and worldviews depends largely on the individual and the situation, therefore cultures are not the determining factor on whether one can find something in common with someone from another culture. Even when similarities cannot be found, the mere task of comparing cultures can provide new insights into one's own culture (Hall, 2005).



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