

## Barriers to Intercultural Communication of Papuan Ethnic Students in Social Interaction at Ichsan University, Gorontalo

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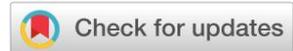
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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to identify the intercultural communication barriers faced by Papuan ethnic students in their social interactions at Ichsan University Gorontalo. The method used in this study is a qualitative research method, with data analysis techniques employing the interactive model of Miles and Huberman. The findings show that there are several intercultural communication barriers experienced by Papuan ethnic students in their social interactions within the environment of Ichsan University Gorontalo. These barriers include the assumption of similarity, which views all cultures as being the same and thus leads to misunderstandings; barriers caused by language differences during communication; barriers resulting from misinterpretation of non-verbal messages such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions; barriers caused by stereotypes and prejudices, especially those of a negative nature during interactions; barriers stemming from a tendency to make negative judgments; and barriers due to deep anxiety and apprehension before engaging in a communication process during interactions.*

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### 1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is a fascinating subject to study. By learning about it, individuals can gain insight into the cultures of different regions and use this understanding as a guide when encountering people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Communicators and interlocutors from different cultural origins can achieve effective communication if both parties understand and respect each other's culture (Weda et al., 2021; Rahman, 2019; Aswad et al., 2019). Humans tend to think and act based on cultural patterns ingrained in them. Culture becomes part of communication behavior and, in turn, communication plays a role in shaping, maintaining, developing, or transmitting culture. When individuals enter a new cultural environment, they often face difficulties or even psychological pressure due to their familiarity with their previous surroundings. One of the biggest anxieties is related to how to communicate properly.

Intercultural communication occurs when the sender and receiver of a message come from different cultural backgrounds. Culture influences communicators and is responsible for the entire repertoire of communicative behaviors and meanings that each person holds (Weda et al., 2022; Junaid et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024). This concept supports the hypothesis that the greater the cultural differences between individuals, the more likely they are to experience uncertainty in achieving effective communication. In everyday life, wherever we are, we frequently communicate with people from various races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds. Interacting and communicating with culturally different individuals is a common and new experience we regularly face. Thus, communication or interaction becomes a familiar and essential activity in human social life, including among students who interact within schools and university campuses (Rahman & Weda, 2019; Rahman et al., 2023; Sukmawaty et al., 2022).

Gorontalo City, located in Gorontalo Province on Sulawesi Island, is home to many students who come to pursue higher education. The city is often referred to as an educational destination in the northern peninsula of Sulawesi. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency of Gorontalo Province, there are currently 12 higher education institutions in the province. Each year, many students from outside Gorontalo City enroll, including those from nearby districts within the province and from other provinces such as Bolaang Mongondow, Buol, Toli-Toli, Luwuk Banggai, and Papua.

Gorontalo has become one of the main destinations in Sulawesi for Papuan students seeking to continue their studies. In almost every campus in the city, Papuan students can be found. One such institution with a significant number of Papuan students is Ichsan University of Gorontalo. However, a stereotype has developed among the Gorontalo community that labels Papuan students as troublemakers, alcoholics, and other negative attributes. These strong stereotypes have made daily life more difficult for students from Papua. For instance, many face challenges in finding housing or boarding accommodations and in engaging with the broader local community. This perception has led many locals to be overly cautious or even fearful when communicating with Papuan students.

This situation reflects a broader issue that constitutes the research problem in this study: what are the intercultural communication barriers faced by Papuan students in their social interactions at Ichsan University of Gorontalo? These challenges have led to communication breakdowns and limited interactions between Papuan students and students from other ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify and understand the intercultural communication barriers experienced by Papuan students in their everyday social interactions at Ichsan University of Gorontalo.

The negative stereotypes present in society have created specific obstacles for Papuan students as they navigate daily life in the city, especially in forming meaningful social communication with the surrounding community. This situation also carries over into their campus life. At Ichsan University of Gorontalo, many Papuan students tend to only interact within their ethnic group while limiting engagement with students from other ethnic backgrounds.

### **1.1 Intercultural Communication**

The relationship between culture and communication is important to understand in order to grasp the concept of intercultural communication, because it is through cultural influence that people learn how to communicate. Their behavior can carry meaning because it is learned and recognized. And this behavior is bound by culture. People view their world through categories, concepts, and labels produced by their culture (Mulyana, 2007).

According to De Vito (2011), intercultural communication refers to communication between individuals who possess different cultural beliefs, values, and behavioral norms. The acceptance of a new culture depends on cultural factors. Individuals coming from cultures similar to the host culture tend to acculturate more easily. Furthermore, younger and educated individuals acculturate more quickly than older and uneducated individuals. Personality factors also play a role—individuals who are open-minded generally find it easier to acculturate.

According to Edward T. Hall (Liliweri, 2003), culture is communication and communication is culture, because only humans possess culture, whereas animals do not. Humans use communication to meet their life needs, which means that communicative behavior is part of the ideal behavior formulated within cultural norms. Thus, what is meant by culture is communication, because culture cannot be separated from communication.

According to Rahardjo (2005), when intercultural communication involves and is related to the cultural similarities and differences between the parties involved, the cultural characteristics of the participants are not the main focus of intercultural communication studies. Rather, the focus is on the communication process between individuals and groups with other groups. A communication activity can be considered effective if there is shared meaning in the messages between the communicator and the communicant, and this applies to intercultural communication as well. However, this becomes more challenging due to the cultural differences between communicators. That is why efforts to establish intercultural communication in practice are not a simple matter.

### **1.2. Barriers to Intercultural Communication**

In communication activities, communication barriers are among the inevitable factors. A communication barrier is anything that hinders effective communication. This also applies in the context of intercultural communication. This is because culture shapes how people interpret the world, so a single word can carry different meanings for individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, by understanding intercultural communication, these communication barriers can be addressed more effectively.

#### **a. Clearly and Comprehensively Understanding Various Barriers in Intercultural Communication**

Clearly and comprehensively understanding the various barriers in intercultural communication serves as a bridge toward achieving effective intercultural communication. Many factors that hinder intercultural communication have been identified by experts. Among them are those proposed by Barna in Moulita (2018), as follows: 1) Assumption of Similarity: Misunderstandings can arise because we often think there are universal similarities among all human beings that would

make communication easy. In reality, adaptations to both biological and social needs, as well as the values, beliefs, and attitudes around us, differ greatly from one culture to another. Since there is no single standard for understanding these differences, each intercultural encounter should be treated uniquely—by seeking to understand the perceptions and communication meanings held by the cultural group we are engaging with.

2) Language Differences: Problems in language use arise when a person focuses only on the literal meaning of a word or phrase in a new language, without considering its connotation or context. 3) Misinterpretation of Nonverbal Cues: People from different cultures experience different sensory realities. They see, hear, and feel only what their culture considers meaningful. 4) Stereotypes and Prejudice: Stereotypes are obstacles in communication because they affect one's ability to view stimuli objectively. Stereotypes often develop from cultural myths or supposed truths that are deeply ingrained, and they may rationalize prejudice. 5) Tendency to Judge: Another barrier to understanding people from different cultures is the tendency to judge—to accept or reject statements and actions of others before understanding their thoughts and feelings from their own perspective. 6) High Anxiety: To be considered competent in intercultural communication, a person must be able to overcome various challenges, including the anxiety or nervousness that may arise when interacting with individuals from different cultures.

### 1.3 Social Interaction

Social interaction is a dynamic social relationship involving individuals and groups of people (Soekanto, 2002). The conditions for social interaction to occur are the presence of social contact and communication (Bungin, 2011). 1) Social Contact: The term "social contact" comes from the Latin *con* or *cum* (together) and *tango* (to touch), so literally, it means "touching together." Physically, social contact occurs when there is a physical connection, but as a social phenomenon, it is not merely a physical relationship. Social interaction does not always involve physical touch—people can interact with one another without physically touching. 2) Communication: Sociology explains communication as a process of interpreting the information, attitudes, and behaviors of others, which may take the form of knowledge, speech, gestures, attitudes, behaviors, or emotions—leading someone to react to that information, attitude, or behavior based on their own past experiences. The phenomenon of communication is also influenced by the medium used. Therefore, the medium can sometimes influence the content of the information and its interpretation. In fact, some experts argue that the medium is itself the message.

## 2. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method, which is a research method used to examine objects in natural settings, where the researcher is the key instrument (Sugiyono, 2014). This type of research is descriptive research, which aims to provide a picture of a situation or event, thereby intending to accumulate basic data (Hikmat, 2011). The data collection techniques used in this study are observation, interviews, and documentation. The informants in this study were selected purposively. Berger defines an informant as follows: "An informant is someone who is assumed to have important information about an object" (Kriyantono, 2007). In this study, the informants were selected based on their relevance to the research topic.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1 Result

The following data are the results of interviews conducted with three university students from Papua currently studying in Gorontalo. The aim was to explore their intercultural communication experiences with peers from different cultural backgrounds. The interviews consisted of nine questions focusing on their duration of stay, first impressions, communication experiences, and conflicts due to cultural differences. The responses are categorized per informant and presented in Indonesian, while the summary explanation is in English.

#### a. Informant 1: AK (Semester 4)

Question No.	Question Summary	Response (Bahasa Indonesia)
1	Duration in Gorontalo	<i>Saya sudah 2 tahun tinggal di sini mulai dari awal kuliah</i>
2	First impression of interacting with culturally different peers	<i>Agak aneh. Ulasan dan nada bicaranya berbeda begitu juga bahasa daerah yang selalu dipakainya sehari-hari.</i>

Question No.	Question Summary	Response (Bahasa Indonesia)
3	How communication occurs with culturally different peers	<i>Kami berkomunikasi dengan bahasa Indonesia saja, terutama kalau di dalam kelas.</i>
4	Misunderstanding due to communication style	<i>Pernah. Nada suara saya yang tinggi dikira kasar, padahal itu biasa di Papua.</i>
5	Language differences causing conflict	<i>Pernah. Terkadang bahasa saya tidak dimengerti dan sebaliknya.</i>
6	Non-verbal misinterpretation causing conflict	<i>Pernah. Gaya bicara tegas kami dikira sedang marah.</i>
7	Prejudices or negative assumptions from others	<i>Pernah. Beberapa teman seperti terganggu saat saya mendekat, seperti menganggap saya harus dijauhi.</i>
8	Negative judgments from others	<i>Pernah. Kami merasa diremehkan, pendapat tidak direspon dalam tugas kelompok.</i>
9	Feelings of anxiety during communication	<i>Ada. Rasa minder dan kurang percaya diri saat ingin bergaul dengan mahasiswa lokal.</i>

AK has lived in Gorontalo for 2 years and often experiences communication challenges stemming from differences in tone, language, non-verbal cues, and cultural stereotypes. He frequently feels underestimated and anxious about interacting with local students.

**b. Informant 2: YD (Semester 8)**

Question No.	Question Summary	Response (Bahasa Indonesia)
1	Duration in Gorontalo	<i>Saya sudah 4 tahun tinggal di sini</i>
2	First impression	<i>Agak bingung waktu pertama kali berkomunikasi dengan mereka, mungkin karena beda suku dengan bahasa.</i>
3	Communication with others	<i>Saya berkomunikasi dengan teman-teman kuliah tapi tidak terlalu sering.</i>
4	Misunderstanding due to tone	<i>Ada beberapa kali karena nada bicara beda tiap daerah, jadi ada salah paham.</i>
5	Language conflict	<i>Pernah. Tidak mengerti bahasa teman di sini, jadi terjadi ketersinggungan.</i>
6	Non-verbal misinterpretation	<i>Pernah. Mahasiswa berbicara sambil melirik dan tertawa, saya merasa ditertawakan.</i>
7	Prejudice	<i>Mungkin karena kami orang Papua dibilang kasar dan tertutup, jadi komunikasi terhambat.</i>
8	Negative judgment	<i>Mahasiswa lokal seperti tidak menganggap kehadiran kami, bahkan tidak menegur.</i>
9	Anxiety during communication	<i>Ada. Khawatir diperlakukan tidak enak atau salah paham, sehingga lebih nyaman bergaul dengan sesama Papua.</i>

YD, having spent 4 years in Gorontalo, still faces barriers due to cultural stereotypes and limited social interaction. Misunderstandings stem from tone, language, and perceived non-verbal disrespect. These issues contribute to his preference for socializing with fellow Papuan students.

### c. Informant 3: RD (Semester 6)

Question No.	Question Summary	Response ( <i>Bahasa Indonesia</i> )
1	Duration in Gorontalo	<i>Saya tinggal di sini sudah 3 tahun</i>
2	First impression	<i>Ada rasa segan berbicara karena beda suku dan budaya</i>
3	Communication style	<i>Biasa saja komunikasinya, tidak terlalu sering</i>
4	Misunderstanding due to style	<i>Pernah. Nada tinggi dikira marah padahal itu biasa di Papua</i>
5	Language misunderstanding	<i>Pernah. Kurang mengerti bahasa masing-masing jadi sering salah paham</i>
6	Non-verbal misinterpretation	<i>Ekspresi saya seperti orang marah, padahal bukan begitu maksudnya</i>
7	Prejudices	<i>Kami disangka pemarah, jadi sering terjadi salah paham</i>
8	Negative judgments	<i>Sering dinilai cepat emosi dan kasar, jadi beberapa orang enggan berkomunikasi</i>
9	Communication anxiety	<i>Masih ragu untuk berkomunikasi karena khawatir terjadi salah paham</i>

## 3.2 Discussion

### a. Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is not an easy communication process to carry out. This is due to the complexity of achieving mutual understanding between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. There are various barriers that arise in the attempt to reach intercultural understanding. These barriers are also experienced by Papuan ethnic students in their social interactions on the campus of Ichsan University Gorontalo.

### b. Assumption of Similarity

The assumption of similarity, which views that each individual is the same as others, is one of the factors that cause misunderstandings in communication. In reality, individuals involved in communication activities inevitably carry their unique cultural backgrounds.

Communication barriers caused by the assumption of similarity are experienced by Papuan ethnic students when interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds on campus. The habit of Papuan students speaking with a high tone and sharp intonation is often misinterpreted by other students as a sign of anger or emotional outburst. This situation frequently leads to misunderstandings between Papuan students and students from other cultures.

### c. Language Differences

Language differences are a significant barrier in intercultural interactions due to the diversity of languages and their meanings. Sometimes, even a single word may carry different meanings across languages.

Communication barriers caused by language differences have also been experienced by Papuan students when interacting with students from different cultural backgrounds on campus. For example, the local language used by non-Papuan students is often not easily understood by Papuan students. This has led to instances of offense and conflict during interactions, causing some Papuan students to become more reserved in their communication with students from other cultural groups.

#### **d. Nonverbal Misinterpretation**

Generally, nonverbal messages (such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions) vary significantly across cultures because people from different backgrounds inhabit different physical and experiential realities.

Communication barriers due to differences in interpreting nonverbal cues have also been experienced by Papuan students on campus. For instance, when they gather with other students, some local students speak in their regional language while laughing and glancing toward the Papuan students. This behavior made the Papuan students feel offended, thinking they were being talked about or mocked.

#### **e. Stereotypes and Prejudice**

Stereotyping is one of the major obstacles in intercultural communication. It stems from subjective views of a particular culture. If not addressed, stereotypes hinder effective intercultural communication.

Communication barriers caused by stereotypes and prejudice have also been experienced by Papuan students in campus interactions. For example, some local students perceive Papuan students as rough and unwilling to mingle. These views disturb the Papuan students, especially when trying to initiate interaction with Gorontaloan students. This situation contributes to their cautiousness when interacting in the campus environment.

#### **f. Tendency to Judge or Evaluate**

Another barrier to understanding people from different cultures is the tendency to judge or evaluate the statements, attitudes, and behaviors of others before trying to understand their thoughts and feelings from their own perspective.

This barrier is also experienced by Papuan students when interacting on campus. They often feel underestimated by students from other cultures. For example, during academic discussions, their opinions are sometimes not responded to or are ignored, which causes some Papuan students to become passive during group tasks or discussions.

#### **g. High Anxiety**

Communication between individuals from different cultures can be particularly challenging at the beginning. Such conditions often lead to anxiety and worry during intercultural communication.

Papuan students often experience anxiety and insecurity when initiating interactions, mainly due to cultural differences. They worry about being poorly received by other students, fear misunderstandings, and are concerned about the difficulty of socializing effectively.

### **4. Conclusion**

Communication barriers can occur in any communication context, including intercultural communication. Several intercultural communication barriers are experienced by Papuan ethnic students in their social interactions on the campus of Ichsan University Gorontalo. These barriers include the assumption of similarity, which views all cultures as the same and leads to misunderstandings; barriers caused by language differences between Papuan students and other students from different cultural backgrounds during communication; barriers due to misinterpretation of nonverbal messages such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions; barriers stemming from stereotypes and prejudices, particularly negative ones, during interaction; barriers resulting from a tendency to make negative judgments toward Papuan students; and barriers caused by the deep anxiety and concern felt by Papuan students before engaging in any interaction.

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