Understanding Intercultural Communication is a comprehensive introductory textbook covering a wide range of topics relating to intercultural communication in today’s global- and technology-oriented society. The book takes the readers on a journey through various intercultural experiences without leaving the classroom, providing carefully selected real-life stories of intercultural experiences and a variety of current issues regarding intercultural communication. The edition under review is well-structured and well-organized, facilitating the students’ development as effective intercultural communicators. The textbook is comprised of three main sections and each part is further divided into three to five sub-sections. Each chapter opens up with clear objectives and a relevant case study and closes with a concise summary along with some practical suggestions regarding actions the students can immediately take.

Ting-Toomey and Chung begin Part I (Chapters 1–4) by introducing some key concepts and a theoretical framework that is necessary in order to understand what is involved in communicating with people from ‘dissimilar’ cultures (including both domestic and international cultures). In Part II (Chapters 5–7), the authors walk the readers through what can actually take place emotionally, linguistically, and pragmatically when people encounter others who have a different cultural background. Finally, in Part III (Chapters 8–12), the authors discuss how one can be a flexible and effective intercultural communicator along with the many challenges one may face striving to accomplish that goal.
The target audience of this textbook may be limited to North American college students, as many examples are very much oriented towards American youth. Many fun-for-the-students trivial facts are scattered throughout the textbook making the topic approachable for the target audience. One concern could be that the freshness of the material may make the book outdated in a short period of time and it will need to be updated frequently.

This textbook is also visually appealing with many relevant photographs, charts and tables that effectively summarize key information. The book is made interactive allowing students to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors by having them take mini-surveys every so often. The main text is written in a manner that makes the reader feel almost as if he/she is actually having a conversation with the authors.

In the opening chapter, the authors embark the students on their intercultural journey by providing many valid reasons why it is important to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to communicate across cultures both domestically and internationally. The topics to be touched upon throughout the entire textbook are also briefly discussed in this chapter; this can be seen as a map indicating where the students will travel on this journey. Multiple levels of culture, namely ‘surface-level culture’, ‘intermediate-level culture’, and ‘deep-level culture’, are also defined, as the readers will be lead from the deep-level culture (e.g., traditions, beliefs, and values) though intermediate-level culture (e.g., symbols, meanings, and norms) and finally to the surface-level culture (e.g., popular culture) (p. 16).

In Chapter 2, the authors explain the meaning of ‘intercultural communication flexibility’. They state that ‘the general goal of intercultural communication is to create shared meanings competently – so that what I intended to say or imply is accurately decoded by the culturally different other and simultaneously, in a culturally appropriate manner’ (p. 33). The authors then provide the readers with some principles they can follow in order to achieve this goal. Each of these principles is explained in detail using vivid examples that actual college students have encountered during their intercultural experiences.

The third chapter deals with cultural values and identity issues. The authors encourage the readers to analyze cultural values using ‘the key value dimensions of individualism – collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and femininity – masculinity’ (p. 43). As is the case in the rest of the book, the authors first allow the students to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors by having them take a mini-quiz on how they themselves may behave in certain situations. Here, cultural values are not only discussed at the personal level, but also at the institutional or organizational levels indicating the diverse applicability of
'cultural value patterns' in a real life setting. In addition, some other value orientations, such as 'activity value orientation', 'people-nature value orientation', and 'temporal value orientation' (p. 52) are explained. By reflecting on one's own cultural or ethnic values, which are closely related to the formation of one's identity, and comparing these values with other values from various perspectives, the authors presume that the readers achieve a better understanding of why certain people outside one's group behave in certain ways and the meaning behind their behavior.

Chapter 4 delves further into cultural and ethnic identity issues. 'Identity' in this chapter is described as 'reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization processes' (p. 66) as originally mentioned in Ting-Toomey (2005). Everyone has more than one identity, and depending on the situation, one may put forward a certain identity. Some may be able to switch between various identities flawlessly according to the situation or environment, while others struggle to choose which identity to put forward. In this chapter, the authors also discuss 'cultural identity' and 'ethnic identity'. The former is defined as 'the emotional significance that we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture' (p. 79), while the latter is based on national origin, race, religion, or language. According to the authors, how one behaves or communicates is affected immensely by the social norms or customs of the dominant cultural group to which one belongs.

This chapter also addresses the multiple, and non-static nature of one's identity. One's identity may sometimes develop into a new identity when one encounters another culture. One can assimilate or maintain both the old and the new identities and alternate between the two. This is referred to as 'identity switching' (p. 85). The authors consider that 'mindful listening' and 'identity validation' are the two most important communicative skills with regard to interacting with people from a different cultural background (p. 87). Identity switching gives one the opportunity to open up the door to the new and unknown world with thoughtfulness and respect to an individual or a group of people of a different culture.

Chapter 5 focuses on the process of 'culture shock'. The authors claim that 'culture shock' is not all negative: 'Culture shock creates an environment and an opportunity for individuals to experiment with new ideas and coping behaviors' (p. 95) and 'it forces individuals to stretch beyond the usual boundaries of thinking and experiencing' (p. 95). Two different models, the 'U-curve adjustment model' and the 'revised W-shape adjustment model', are given to explain the process of how one goes through the various stages of culture shock. 'Reentry culture shock', which occurs when one returns to his/her homeland, is also
explained, covering all the stages of the culture shock process as well as how one may be able to manage at each stage – although the authors also emphasize that depending upon the individual and the situation, the experience of culture shock may vary significantly.

The next two chapters deal with the actual communication process, first verbal communication and next non-verbal communication across different cultures.

The authors begin Chapter 6 by stating: ‘Without language, we cannot make sense of the cultural world around us. [Without language,] we cannot pass on the wisdom of our culture from one generation to the next’ (p. 112). Indeed, ‘language is the key to the heart of culture’ (p. 115). Various differences in the linguistic features of different languages are, first, presented from phonological, morphological, syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic points of view. Various functions of human language are, then, discussed. One of the most important functions which is relevant to intercultural communication is how the language shapes the way we think and understand the world. Sapir and Whorf were among the first scholars to identify the connection between language and culture (p. 121). Language is also closely related to identifying with certain groups of people; ‘language maintenance issues’ and ‘code switching’ are some of the examples indicating language’s relationship to group identity (p. 121). Language also influences how we think. Consider, for example, some gender-non-neutral words such as businessman, and mankind, or some brand names such as ‘coke’ and ‘Gillette’ being used to refer to any soft drinks or razors (p. 122). It can be easily observed that our ‘thinking patterns’ are changing through the language we use.

Concepts of ‘low-context culture’ and ‘high-context culture’ are also introduced in this chapter. While in low-context culture, what needs to be conveyed is verbally expressed, in high-context culture, much information is implied and expected to be understood without spoken words or sometimes using complete silence as a means of communication. This can be a major cause of misunderstanding if people from different types of culture are communicating without being aware of such differences. Ting-Toomey and Chung point out that another cause of misunderstanding can be blamed on ‘self-enhancement’ vs. ‘self-humbling’ styles. When verbally communicating with people across cultural borders, it is necessary to be aware of different communicative norms used in various cultures without immediately drawing a conclusion that someone is, for example, being rude or being ambiguous.

Chapter 7 discusses how different nonverbal communication norms across cultures affect the way we communicate. As with verbal communication, non-verbal communication norms vary across different language communities. The
authors indicate that ‘it is nonverbal communication that embodies the rich and nuanced meanings of the culture’ (p. 133). Seven forms of nonverbal communication – physical appearance, paralanguage (vocal cues), facial expressions, kinesics (body movements), haptics (touch), oculesics (eye contact), and proxemics (space) (p. 135) – are explained in various cultural contexts. The authors also touch upon the ‘cultural display rules’ that relate to the way different cultures display emotion and how computer-mediated communication (such as the use of abbreviations and emoticons) has been changing the rules (p. 140). They warn that one tends to draw conclusions regarding other people without truly examining and understanding their cultures; thus, they encourage readers to approach non-verbal means of communication with ‘sensitivity, respect, and open-minded attitudes as good first steps in gaining nonverbal entrance to a culture’ (p. 152).

The first chapter in part III (Chapter 8) examines the human tendency to be biased or prejudiced against outgroup members. Ting-Toomey and Chung argue that ‘labeling’ and ‘selective interpretation’ are some of the main reasons for this, as ‘our perceptions of others are highly subjective, selective, and biased’ (p. 161). One also tends to use his/her own in-group norms as the basis for judging out-group members. Further on in this chapter, such concepts as ‘ethnocentrism’ and ‘stereotypes’ are explained and various types of discriminations and racism are discussed, which are followed by some practical suggestions in reducing such emotions.

Chapter 9 focuses on intercultural conflict and its management. Different cultures approach conflict in very different manners, but when the conflict is between members of two different cultures, it can develop into a quite complicated situation. The authors explain that in intercultural conflicts, ‘perceptions are filtered through our lenses of ethnocentrism and stereotypes’ (p. 187) and they ‘add biases and prejudice to our conflict attribution processes and it is further complicated by dealing with different culture-based verbal and nonverbal conflict styles’ (p. 187). ‘Cross-cultural and cross-ethnic conflict styles’ are also discussed using face-negotiation theory. The authors link ‘mindful listening’, one of the strategies mentioned previously, to ‘face-validation’ and ‘power-sharing-skill’, and suggest that intently and thoughtfully listening to culturally dissimilar others is one of the most valid technics in developing ‘cultural empathy’ and solving intercultural conflict (pp. 199–201).

While Chapter 9 focuses more on intercultural relationships among groups of people, Chapter 10 deals with intercultural issues on a more individual and personal level paying attention, especially, to the intimate relationship, such as romantic relationship and family relationship, at various stages of its development.
Among others, issues such as initial attraction, dating, marriage, dissolving of an intimate relationship, family issues and raising bicultural/biracial children are discussed. Often, people from different cultures have different expectations at different stages of an intimate relationship, and these expectations pose many challenges for the couples. Miscommunication can occur due to cultural differences, and inter-racial couples sometimes become the target of discrimination from others as well. The authors state that ‘self-disclosure is one of the key factors in developing a personal relationship in any culture or ethnic group’ (p. 251). Aside from ‘culture-sensitive dialog’ and ‘genuine relational commitment’, intercultural couples need to pay extra attention to the development of ‘cultural, ethnic, and relational identity’ in overcoming various obstacles (p. 227).

In Chapter 11, ‘global’ and ‘local’ identities are compared. As the Internet becomes accessible to more and more people and takes over the core of our lives, the concept of our cultural identity is also changing. Technology and pop-culture are strongly influencing the identity of the next generation. This new type of identity, called ‘e.netizen’, is brought to light in this chapter. Both through media (especially television) and the Internet, local culture has become easily accessible to a global audience. Being exposed to international media, ‘identity imitation’ can take place. Unlike the local identity which consists of ‘ethnic values, practices, and traditions’ (p. 232), ‘global identity is made up of individuals who adopt and embrace international practices and values over local practices… It keeps up with the latest trends, technological advances, international programming, and consumer materialism’ (p. 232). A person’s identity is composed through social interactions with the various people surrounding him/her, and media is, in that sense, also responsible for creating and furthering certain stereotypes and universally perceived characteristics of certain groups of people (Comstock 1993:311). Pop culture also plays an important role in obscuring cultural boundaries, as ‘pop culture creates a cultural interdependence on the global economy, e-commerce, mass media, and social network platforms’ (p. 236). The term ‘e.netizen’ is defined as a ‘new generation of individuals, from any age group, wired to the internet via intersecting space’ (p. 238). E.netizens are considered to have a ‘hybrid’ identity (a mixture of local and global identities), though degrees of orientation toward global cultures vary by individuals. An e.netizens’s identity can be quite ambiguous at times, as one can easily modify one’s identity according to the circumstances (p. 248).

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the discussion of ethics. What is considered ethical in one culture may be considered unethical in another. The question of whose ethical values should be applied challenges the readers through some real examples of news-making situations. Various positions such as ‘ethical
relativism’, ‘ethical universalism’, and ‘meta-ethics contextualism’ are discussed. In order for one to become an ‘ethical intercultural communicator’, the authors suggest that one has to ‘strive to act ethically in both intentions and actions’ (p. 259).

Despite the fact that the book contains a few inaccurate examples such as the Japanese law regarding voting rights for people born outside the country (p. 172) and an awkward and inconsistent use of expressions, for example, ‘Ota-san’ (-san: Japanese expression added at the end of a person’s name) and ‘Mr. Ota’ (p. 184), this textbook is, overall, a valuable resource for anyone interested in intercultural communication and intercultural competence. This type of comprehensive student-oriented textbook on intercultural communication is rare in Europe and can be of great use not only in North America, but also, with some modification of the examples, at European educational institutions. All of the sections are presented in a coherent order, and each chapter is filled with stimulating example stories, valuable information backed with a solid theoretical framework, and practical suggestions as well as delightful visual aids. Ting-Toomey and Chung have put a tremendous amount of work and effort into compiling this textbook. The book is certainly worth recognition, and the effect this textbook may have in generating flexible, effective, and competent intercultural communicators is going to be enormous.

References
