

Re-imagining Understanding of Intercultural Communication, Culture and Culturing

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Abstract

The paper examines intercultural communication as the management of messages across cultures. Our understanding of culture, culturing and intercultural communication enlarges our understanding of what being human means and, moreover, expands moral action by locating our humanity within a constantly changing world. This emergent quantum understanding brings a closer look on intercultural theory and the phenomenon of culturing, thus, broadening human understanding of intercultural communication.

Key words: intercultural communication, culture, culturing, quantum, intercultural theory

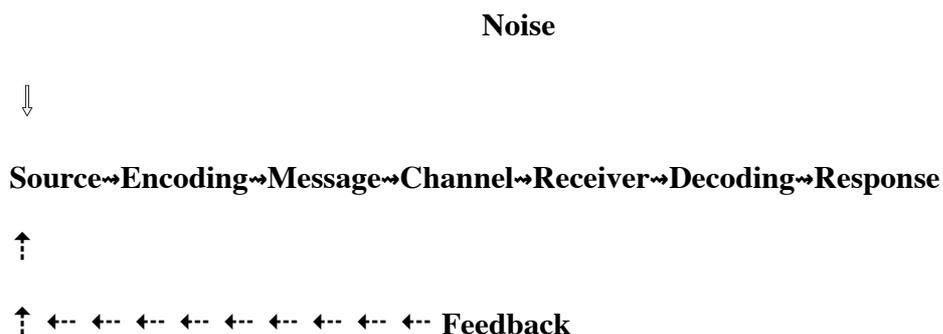
1. FRAMING CULTURE AND CULTURING

Since the dawn of history many philosophers and theorists have tried to find the most suitable definition of culture which is a very complex phenomenon varying along many dimensions. Any attempt whatsoever to factor out the dimensions and to provide a scale for that measurement is far beyond the scope of this article. Truly enough, there are a great many ways of defining the word culture where CULTURE is not used in the sense of literature, music and art but rather in the sense of a shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior but simply "the way we do things around here" (Gibson 2000). Culture manifests itself both in patterns of language and thought and in forms of activity and behavior. These patterns become models for common adaptive acts and styles of expressive behavior which enable people to live in a society within a given geographical environment at a given state of technical development. Being so complex to define, culture can be viewed as a communication problem as well, because it is not constant but variable. And as cultural variance increases, so do the problems of communication. That is why various models have been used to illustrate the concept. It can be seen as an iceberg with the tangible expressions of culture and behavior above the surface of the water and the underlying attitudes, beliefs, values and meanings below the surface. Depending on a person's perspective those involved in intercultural interactions are on a cruise liner approaching the iceberg or the Titanic about to crash into it. Consequently, we usually come across the common criticism that we are maybe conscientiously covering up the many points of conflict, dissent and diversity that permeate all cultures and, in doing so, covering the full complexity that cultures possess and even create. More importantly, such a cover-up, that is really distorting our perceptions of homogeneity and stability, forces us to adopt dichotomous stances that stop us from "moving toward multiple perspectives that might inform each other in a dialogue of differences" (Dervin, 1991, p. 50). As Said (2001) notes, "There isn't a single Islam: there are Islams, just as there are Americas. This diversity is true of all traditions, religions or nations even though some of their adherents have futilely tried to draw boundaries around themselves and pin their creeds down neatly." (p. 135) Therefore, we are demanding more complex understandings of how we constitute our mapping and framing of cultures as to afford a more versatile understanding of the complexity, discontinuity and diversity that constitute race, ethnicity and difference (Dervin, 1991; Fry, 1998; Olmsted, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998, Said, 2000) by discouraging herd mentality and trying to shun insensitive behavior. In that sense, the term culturing, equally important for understanding culture, can be defined as "our proclivity to construct new and different meanings, understandings and practices so as to reckon with the world's infinite ambiguity and quantum nature that constantly destabilize extant meanings, understandings and practices" (Rodriguez, 1998, 1). We are always constructing new and different ways of understanding the world, which is to say that cultures are always taking into consideration instability and change. No culture is inherently stable and homogenous. No culture can be generalized about. Culturing is born out of our uniquely human need to bring meaning to bear upon the world's ambiguity. So all cultures possess a striving to evolve, and through such evolution find prosperity.

This requires cultures realizing those rhythms that promote new meanings and interpretations while simultaneously allowing for the devolution of current meanings and interpretations.

2. RE-IMAGING COMMUNICATION

Integral to this is the promotion of ways that encourage understanding of communication. As McPhail observes (1996), "Communication, as it has been practiced and continues to be practiced in Western culture, is geared towards social control and the maintenance of existing ideological and epistemological structures" (p.138). Yet the simplest definition could be that communication is the act of understanding and being understood by the audience. This involves the sending and receiving of information between a sender and a receiver. This happens not only through the use of words, but also through non-verbal factors like gestures and facial expressions. The message received can be very different from the message that was sent. The common model of communication is shown in the diagram:



The idea or feeling comes from the Source. This input into symbols (Encoding) to produce a message which is transmitted through a Channel. The channel is the medium used for communication (e.g. writing). The message is interpreted by the Receiver (Decoding) who responds with a feedback that can be either positive or negative. Noise here means anything which distorts the message. This means that communication can be very difficult if the difference between cultures is great; it can break down completely if there is too much 'cultural noise'. Due to this complexity many consider that communication is an art. It depends upon the technique adopted by the person trying to communicate. Communication could be viewed both as creative art and a scientific process. The artistic part is a largely learned behavior. Only a part of it depends upon the innate competence of the individual who tries to communicate. The mechanical part, however, is independent of culture. Since the human part of communication is largely a learned behavior, it should be possible for members of one culture to learn and develop the art of communication of another culture. This is the moment where communicators are introduced to the arena of intercultural communication as the means for overcoming possible misunderstandings that underpin interaction between members of different culture. Today, in our internationally troubled world that is racially and nationalistically tense more than ever before both culture and communication have evolved considerably and have become interdependent on one another. In this way, they make us see the world from a different perspective by affording us constant access to new experiences, new meanings and new understandings (Arthos, 2000; Gordon, 2000) finding a proper place for us in that same world and helping us explain the world and ourselves by connecting people through the very culture, thus, celebrating diversity.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURING

Intercultural communication, a buzz word of our times, is defined as a multi disciplinary academic field of research and study that seeks to understand how people from different countries and cultures behave, communicate and perceive the world by creating a cultural synergy. There are many researchers and academics of note within the intercultural field that naturally all have different definitions of intercultural communication. For example Karlfried Knapp defines it "as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups, which differ from each other in respect of the knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behavior" (p. 190). As an integral part of it, communication is the most important quality for anyone to work on if they want to work or be part of an intercultural society and the most rewarding one as well teaching us that culture always changes because of internal and external influences. Intercultural communication(1) is not new; as long as people from different cultures have been encountering one another there has been intercultural communication. It(2) is

a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which the degree of difference between people is large and important enough to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what is regarded as competent behaviors that should be used to create shared meanings. In reality a common observation people tend to make about intercultural communication is that it, actually, stereotypes people. The fact that intercultural training presents information on a particular nationality or culture is taken to be a negative attribute, i.e. that we box people with rigid labels that correlate to their behavior, values or actions. Such observations are misplaced. Intercultural awareness training does provide conclusions on cultures or nationalities but it does not stereotype. Stereotyping is usually a negative statement about a group of people that emerges when a blanket perception is applied to an entire group of people. For example, we may know one Japanese person who is very quiet so we conclude that all Japanese are quiet and reserved. Or we see certain media images and conclude that because a person is Muslim they are prone to violence and aggression against non-Muslims or images of Serbs as ultra-nationalists. All are far from the truth. A stereotype is an incorrect perception of a people based on minimal experiential evidence. Stereotyping is therefore rightly seen as a negative way of seeing people. This is even true of positive stereotypes. Again, a positive stereotype is where we use a blanket expression for a whole people, i.e. all the Chinese are great at math, all Germans are well-organized or all English people are well mannered. Although the intent behind the statement is positive, it still does not reflect the truth. As a consequence people shy away from making stereotypes and believe every individual should be taken on their own merit. Although in a perfect world this is an ideal scenario, when preparing someone with intercultural training to live in India, negotiate in Dubai or work with Brazilians, it is completely impractical. Intercultural training must therefore provide people with some sort of standard against which they can make reference. This is done through "generalizations" not stereotypes. Generalizations are different from and far more reliable than stereotypes.

What intercultural training does is observe a people, pinpoint commonalities and draw certain conclusions based on these. For example, an intercultural researcher or trainer working and/or living in Kuwait is able to make a few accurate, but at the same time, general statements about the Kuwaitis. They may therefore be able to make the generalizations that one should be aware of gender roles, that to do business building a personal relationship is crucial, that if you have a good network of contacts this should be used, and that decision making can be a long slow process that ultimately always rests at the top of an organization. Naturally there will be exceptions to these rules, but generalizations can and do paint a pretty accurate picture of a country or people. This is because although there are many layers to people, i.e. gender culture, lifestyle culture, regional culture, etc, they all in one way or another fall under the umbrella of national culture. To a certain extent then, most people will share common traits defined by their national culture. A salient point to note is that intercultural training discourages participants from using blanket views of peoples. The spirit and ethos of intercultural training is to encourage people to discover one another through personal interaction. Real intercultural awareness only comes through experience. What intercultural training does is provide people who feel they need to know more about a country before working or living there with a safety net.

This safety net provides them with a safe form of reference when they are unsure about an intercultural situation. Once that person actually goes through the experience of meeting someone, conducting negotiations or entertaining a guest they can then discard the safety net and refer to their own experiences. In conclusion, intercultural training does not stereotype people but provides generalizations. These generalizations are based upon careful research and observation and offer people with simple guidelines on a country or culture. These guidelines simply act as an intercultural safety net people can turn to when uncertain. Only through experience can people really apply true intercultural knowledge and competency which is matter of highest importance if man and society are to survive in the age of a growing international terrorism and ethnic tensions. That is why looking at cultures from a quantum standpoint allows us to move beyond the horrors that attend to cultural hegemony while simultaneously allowing us to make moral claims about different culture in the most interesting of ways. Therefore, by adopting a culturing standpoint reveals how the constant evolving and changing nature of cultures constantly undermines efforts to establish and sustain cultural hegemony. Culturing highlights the quantity tensions and contradictions that define all cultures. We simultaneously see the homogeneity and diversity, the stability and instability, the order and the chaos, and so forth. We also see the political, moral, and existential struggles and the many contests over meanings, interpretations, and symbols that define all cultures and ultimately come to understand that claims of cultural uniformity and stability will always be illusory but never hopeless. Culturing gives us a moral direction rather than a moral

destination promoting intercultural communication practices that stress diversity, sensitivity and other ways of being that make or intend for no harm to others and the world. In this way, culturing does make for a superior morality. For example, cultures where peoples of different understandings, truths, and even gods, live peacefully with each other are indeed morally superior to other cultures where such peoples are persecuted, maimed, and killed for simply being the other (as seen in Former Yugoslavia, Cambodia and the Stalin Russia). In sum, culturing does give us a way to understand which communication and cultural practices acknowledge and appreciate otherness and difference, while at the same time cultivating "an awareness of those aspects that perpetuate symbolic violence" (McPhail, 1996, p. 150). It also acknowledges, even celebrates, the cultural commonalities that morally bound us together, and, in so doing, "lessens the threats of our [cultural] differences." Yet culturing demystifies cultures without destroying or infringing on their inherent complexity. It gives us a means to understand cultures without making us believe that our understandings can ever be or need to be complete and absolute. So, whereas, intercultural communication theory has long focused on describing what is, culturing allows us now to also consider what can be and also what needs to be.

Finally, in a world where recent horrendous events seem to be confirming the hypothesis about the coming "clash of civilizations," culturing reframes our understanding of cultures in a way that neither undermines hope nor the possibility of us forging new ways of being together with others who seem to be so culturally different and alien to us, even to the point of being seen as less human than us. Thus "for future generations to condemn themselves to prolonged war and suffering without so much as a critical pause, without looking at interdependent histories of injustice and oppression, without trying for common emancipation and mutual understanding seems far more willful than necessary" (Said, 2001).

Lastly, our profound understanding of culture comes with a help of intercultural communication that makes us realize how different we actually really are assuming that human beings are fundamentally relational beings with a striving and potentiality for communion with the world and each other. We are culturing beings—always constructing and deconstructing cultures. However, since, this is, again, the world of chaos and order, ambiguity and meaning, homogeneity and diversity, stability and instability, equilibrium and disequilibrium, intercultural and no communication at all - cultures, like all organic entities, are constantly negotiating these tensions within a frame of intercultural communication. Yet these tensions are natural catalysts for life's evolution and expansion through which humanity evolves and expands making culture, culturing and intercultural communication mutually involved in the process.

Notes

1For those wanting to dig a bit deeper it may be a good idea to look into the works of Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Harry C. Triandis, Fons Trompenaars, Clifford Geertz and Shalom Schwartz.

2The theories developed by the researchers and academics can and have been applied to many fields such as business, management, marketing, advertising and website design. As business becomes more and more international, many companies need to know how best to structure their companies, manage staff and communicate with customers. Intercultural communication gives them an insight into the areas they need to address or understand. Intercultural communication theories are now also used within the education, health care and other public services due to growing multicultural populations.

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