Intercultural Communication

as a Dominant Paradigm

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Introduction

To begin an overview of intercultural communication it is important to attempt to clarify the concepts of communication and culture.

What Is Communication?

For this paper we will use a definition that communication is:

> *"that behaviour which happens whenever meaning is attributed to behaviour or to the residue of behaviour. When someone observes our behaviour or it's residue and gives meaning to it, communication has taken place regardless of whether our behavior was conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional" (Samovar 1997, p16).*

This definition does not encompass all elements of communication as Casmir points out it is "impossible to develop one single definition or methodological approach" (Casmir, 1989, p. 279).

What Is Culture?

Of all the concepts buried in "intercultural communication", by far the most difficult and contested is "culture". In order to "ground" the bewildering array of theories of intercultural communication, it is important to see how this notion is being used. Conceptions of culture vary in the literature according to how broadly it is defined, and how much explanatory power it is allowed to wield.

Breadth: what does "culture" include?

Many researchers treat culture less as a concept with intrinsic meaning than as a fence to be erected about other concepts. Almost every author, in each new piece of research, erects the fence in a slightly different place, and in so doing, redefines the parameters of the field. However, two broad groupings can be identified, and one historical hangover.

The hangover is a preoccupation with *ethnicity* as a key delineator of cultural groups. This is undoubtedly an artefact of the anthropological roots of the field. Importantly, it has meant that until recently, intercultural communication has been mostly about inter*ethnic* communication. Even where other aspects of culture have gained in prominence, interethnic communication is still seen as the paradigm case for IC.

Of the two broad groupings, one is essentially *mentalist*. The salient aspects of culture exist in the mind, though they are evidenced in the world. They include beliefs, concepts, values, and rules. The second group extends the boundaries of culture into the external world to encompass the behavioural outcomes of these interior beliefs and concepts, and even physical artefacts. A mainstream example of the latter is Samovar and Porter's Reader, a standard work in the field. They stake their territory this way:

> *"For our purposes, we define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe,* and material objects and possessions *acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." (Samovar and Porter (Eds.), 1997, p. 12f.) [emphasis added]*

Note that the difference between these groups is a subtle one, turning less on the issue of *what is cultural*, and more on *what is of interest*, which in turn is largely a reflection of the *purposes* of different writers, as the quote above suggests. Mentalists are generally interested in explanation. If culture is defined too broadly, it risks losing explanatory power. Samovar and Porter, on the other hand, and many others like them, are out to make us *effective communicators*. It is therefore in their interest to bring the external world – where communication takes place – into the ambit of their notion of culture. They make this clear in the Preface to their Reader:

> *"We have intentionally selected materials that will assist you in understanding those intercultural communication principles that are instrumental to the achievement of success when interacting with people from diverse cultures. Fundamental to our approach is the conviction that communication is a social activity; it is something people do with and to each other. While the activity might begin in our heads, it is manifested in our behaviors – be they verbal or non-verbal." (Samovar and Porter (Eds.), 1997, p. Ix)*

In this, they show behaviourist interests and an empiricist philosophy. The majority of research into intercultural communication is conducted broadly within this framework.
The issue of the breadth of the notion of culture has implications for the explanatory power of any communications theory that employs it. As culture is allowed to encompass more, it becomes highly tempting to invoke it to account for a wide range of intercultural problems and issues. At the same time it is less able to explain when invoked, as it masks the fact that many different potential causes and effects are sheltering under its roof.

Keeping "culture" under control

Culture is, in fact, something of a theoretical monster. To keep it from breaking out and ruining the conceptual landscape, many theorists have imposed controls. In practice, this consists of "fixing" the link between culture and behaviour, and eliminating variables that would complicate explanation, such as varying degrees of cultural membership, and the presence of non-cultural factors.
Jan Blommaert puts it this way:

> *"This notion of culture imposes a linear and static grid on empiry. It suggests a direct connection between a set of stable, immutable essences -- the core values and norms -- on the one hand and all kinds of observable behavior on the other. If a Japanese does not directly say 'no' when a business proposal is unacceptable to him, then that must be a consequence of his cultural principles of indirectness and politeness (and not, for instance, of the fact that he is not entitled to say either 'no' and 'yes' then and there, or that he needs to consult other people before deciding, and so forth)." (Blommaert, 1998)*

Circumscribing culture in this way gives us licence to use it in explanation. The instant we allow change and variation into the concept we make it nearly impossible to pinpoint individual cultural causes. At the same time, we are obliged to admit a wide range of non-cultural factors into evidence.
The issue of variation is particularly vexed because of the *social nature* of culture. Nearly all definitions of culture take it as axiomatic that culture is shared; it is not the property of an

individual, but of a group. The problem for intercultural communication is that communication is never between cultures *per se*, but always between people. And people, and the contexts in which they interact, are unique, dynamic, and changeable. This issue is usually framed in terms of *membership*. Most research has tended to take membership as a given: the groups whose culture is under discussion are fully and equally members of that culture. Variation is acknowledged in a footnote, but not permitted to temper cultural explanations. Pressed to its logical extreme, the uniformist assumption turns members of a culture into *instances* of a culture, and deprives them of the (theoretical) space to influence their culture, or to adapt[1]. At the very best, it is distinctly unfaithful to the empirical world it wishes to explain[2].

Of course, the sharedness of culture is uncontested: no one doubts the existence of groups, and given the broad definitions offered earlier, we can affirm that groups inevitably have something in common that is cultural. And since the business of theory-building is drawing patterns from apparent chaos, some generalisation and fixing of variables is not only allowable but essential for a theory to emerge at all. But the cost of such fixing in a field encompassing so many variables is very high. Readers should examine cultural explanations closely before they buy.

In the following sections, we review the history of intercultural communication and outline several theories that illustrate the range of options open to researchers. Edward T. Hall, the godfather of the field, is first up. The mainstream empiricist group is represented in Gudykunst and Kim's work, taken from their book Communicating with Strangers, and by Stella Ting-Toomey's theory of face negotiation. Attribution Theory is also considered. Gudykunst and Kim (1997), in particular, is a good test case for the state of intercultural theory, as it attempts a full-featured account of intercultural communication, subsuming a wide body of research. The remaining theories are more modest in their ambitions. We sketch Ron and Suzanne Wong Scollon's discourse analysis approach, then sample research from within the ethnographic tradition of Dell Hymes.

History

The issues of intercultural communication are not new. In the New Testament era of history, the apostle Paul expresses his technique for dealing with intercultural communication.

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[1] Young, 1996, p. 37 goes into this in some depth.

2 It is, however, not difficult to see why the assumption has been made. The field of intercultural communication grew out of anthropological research, much of which was concerned with cultures very different from those of the researchers. And this is precisely when the assumption of full membership looks most credible. Viewed from up above, and at a cognitively discreet distance, the members of the Azande culture *do* look rather uniform. Of course, researchers could never so easily claim the same of their own cultural milieu.

> *"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win the Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law ... that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law... that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." (New American Standard Bible).*

Paul's comments indicate awareness that in order to communicate effectively with another culture there needs to be a level of empathy or identification with the principles of that culture. Whenever people of one culture want to deal in some way with others outside that culture, the need for understanding issues of intercultural communication exist, and techniques for facilitating communication begin to emerge.

Historically, intercultural communication study has been associated with several disciplines and it is only since the 1950s that intercultural communication has been evaluated in its own right.

Intercultural communication, as a study, began with initial work by Hall and others at the Foreign Service Institute in the early 1950s. In most literature, Edward Hall is considered the founder of intercultural communication. Prior to World War II, the United States of America was relatively isolated and was not caught up in intercultural communication issues. At the end of World War II, the U.S.A. found itself as the largest economy without damage. Consequently the United States attempted to assist Europe to rebuild, but misunderstandings of communication and culture caused many of these projects to be ineffectual (Hart, 1996)

Table 1. The Stages in the History of Intercultural Communication Study (Hart, 1996)

	Stages in Kuhn's (1970) Development of a Science from pre-paradagmatic research to normal science	**Main Events in the Development of Intercultural Communication Study**
1	Establishment of a Conceptual Framework Problem articulation; statements of how part of universe works; fact-gathering; organisation of ideas	1950s: The "conception" of Intercultural Communication study 1951-1956: Hall's work at FSI 1959 Publication of The Silent Language

2	Paradigm-Acceptance Testing of hypotheses within applications originally specified Formulations of specialized courses, societies and journals Search for greater clarity	1960s: "The Application Decade" Training of diplomats, business people, and Peace Corp volunteers. 1970s: "The birth of intercultural communication" Establishment of specialised IC courses, SIETAR, and IJIR Late 1970s: "Definitional Problems"
3	Theory Construction	1980s: Gudykunst and others' work on theory development
4	Founding of a Mature "Normal" Science	????: This stage has not yet occurred for intercultural communication.

From 1946 to 1956, the need for cultural information in the United States was handled by the Foreign Service Institute, which was used to train Foreign Service Diplomats and other staff. Hall joined the Foreign Service Institute in 1951.

In the 1960's, intercultural communication had yet to develop the necessary resources for it to stand alone as a discipline. Condon claims that in the early 1960s there "were no courses, no books, and few articles in the field" (Condon, 1975 p. xi)

The real 'birth' of intercultural communication happened in the 1970's with specialized intercultural communication courses, societies and journals.

Intercultural communication study still has a way to go before becoming established as a mature normal science, according to Kuhn's paradigm development as can be seen in Table 1.

Theories

Hall: Context Theory

E. T. Hall's concept of high and low context messages looks at communication according to the relative importance of the context of the message. A low context message has explicit information in the message, with little or no 'unspoken' or implied information. In a high context message much of the meaning is implicit and passed on by the situation, relationships, and non-verbal messages (Hall, 1976, Habke & Sept).

A high context culture is identified as a culture where communication depends on subtleties and situation. Low context cultures are ones where everything is communicated by explicit information.

This theory goes some way toward lowering the likelihood of causing offense in intercultural communication. By having a general view of a culture, measures can be taken to adjust to another culture improving the chance of accurate communication. As explained earlier, this theory is the tip of the iceberg in the icy waters of communication with immense numbers of other factors to consider. Hall himself identifies that "there is little in language or culture that can be pinned down the way many would like" (Hall, 1976, p.115).

Gudykunst and Kim: Communicating with Strangers

William Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim are significant figures in intercultural communication theory. Gudykunst in particular has long spearheaded efforts to develop a body of theory that would give coherence to the field[3]. Gudykunst came to theorise about intercultural communication while he was training others to do it (as a Navy specialist deployed in Japan). Yun Kim emigrated to the US after growing up in Korea; her particular interest has been in communication aspects of the cultural adjustment of immigrants. Both are squarely in the empiricist camp, and their theorising is ultimately for pragmatic ends:

> *"We focus on theoretical issues more than most authors of existing texts on intercultural communication. We believe that in order to understand the process of intercultural communication and to improve our intercultural effectiveness, we must have the conceptual tools to understand what is happening." (Gudykunst and Kim, 1997, p. xii).*

Gudykunst and Kim weave their theory around the notion of the *stranger*, which they conceive as "… people who are members of different groups and unknown to us" (Gudykunst and Kim, 1997, p. 25). In doing so, they make it clear that *all* communication is in some sense intercultural. The difference between, say, your interaction with a colleague at work who shares your ethnicity and language, and your interaction with a visiting Inuit who shares neither, is not a *qualitative* difference, just a question of the degree of strangeness.

This is an important theoretical admission. Earlier empiricist theories were criticised for seeing interethnic communication as different in kind from intraethnic communication, a view which rose naturally from the static, ethnicity-bound notions of culture discussed earlier. By demoting ethnicity, Gudykunst and Kim pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of culture operating at every level of "group".

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[3] See Gudykunst (Ed.), 1983, and especially his introductory essay to the volume.

The authors suggest there are four types of culture-related influences on the process of communication. *Cultural influences* include values, norms and rules. Norms and rules are "… sets of expected behaviors for particular situations." (Gudykunst and Kim, 1997, p. 47). *Sociocultural influences* also include values, norms and rules, but these are keyed not to situations but to social roles such as physician or employer. *Psychocultural influences* are those derived not from our culture or society, but our own personal experience and psychological makeup. Finally, *environmental influences* relate to our expectations of behaviour in a given physical environment.

Much of their work consists of filing the theoretical notions of others within each of these categories. A preference for high or low context, for example, is discussed as a cultural influence; ethnocentrism and prejudice are potential psychocultural influences. Throughout, Gudykunst and Kim are careful to observe that while one tendency – individualism, say – may hold at a cultural level, any individual within that culture is free to prefer collectivism. Their concern to incorporate others' research and to free the individual is the key strength of their theory. By bringing scattered research findings under one paradigmatic roof they almost make intercultural communication look like a coherent science (to an empiricist, at any rate). Acknowledging the individual opens the way to variation, to non-cultural, situational influences: in short, it acknowledges the real world.

However, this strength is also its key weakness. A paradigm whose theoretical constructs are legion, and whose generalised predictions any individual can thwart, is a paradigm without any real power to pinpoint or explain. Consequently, as Gudykunst and Kim apply it later in their book, the counsel they offer to communicators is inevitably bland and general. Science doesn't come much softer.

As a test case for the maturity of the field, Communicating with Strangers falls short. It seems unable to offer us a full-featured paradigm that does justice to the data. Gudykunst and Kim want us to have our cake *and* eat it. Unfortunately, the plate appears a little bare.

Heider: Attribution Theory

Attribution theory was developed by social psychologists in particular Fritz Heider. Attribution theory looks at the information people use in making inferences, and the causes of observed behavior. Attribution theory describes the processes of explaining events and the behavioral and emotional consequences of those explanations.

Heider first wrote about attribution theory in his book 'The Psychology of Interpersonal Relationships' (1958) which played a central role in the development and definition of attribution theory. Heider suggested a set of rules of inference by which the ordinary person might attribute responsibility to another person for an action. Heider distinguished between

internal and external attributions, arguing that both personal forces and environmental factors operate on the person.
The three factors that influence the attribution include consistency, distinctiveness and consensus.
The attribution theory relies on people being logical and yet “one of the most common research findings is that people are often illogical and biased in their attributions.” (Littlejohn, 1999, p.133). A further difficulty with the attribution theory is that “one of the persistent findings in attribution research is the *fundamental attribution error*. This is the tendency to attribute the cause of events to personal qualities.” (Littlejohn). Attribution theory has some value as an attempt to explain why certain cultures behaved the way they did. It provides a great vehicle for research but that research defines little in the way of predictability of cultural behaviour.

Stella Ting-Toomey: Face Negotiation Theory

Stella Ting-Toomey's face theory looks at how different cultures manage the strategies to maintain, save, or honour face. She sees face as symbolic and “as a claimed sense of self-respect in a relational situation.” ( ). Face-negotiation theory attempts to explain the influence of cultural differences in response to conflict. The basic premise of this theory is that people from different kinds of cultures tend to manage "facework" differently and therefore prefer different types of conflict management (Chadwick). The concept of face is also used to explain politeness (Chadwick). Positive politeness addresses positive face concerns, often by showing prosocial concern for the other's face. Negative politeness addresses negative face concerns, often by acknowledging the other's face is threatened.
Ting Toomey’s theory is based on the premise that interpersonal communication is an intentional process. To factor out unconscious and unintentional activity leaves the theory open to criticism in a similar way to attribution.
Face theory also specifies cultures as primarily national in character, which ignores important interethnic and other subcultural issues arising within national boundaries. (Sept , ??)

Scollon and Wong Scollon: a discourse approach

Like Gudykunst and Kim, Ron and Suzanne Wong Scollon attempt to set out and apply a theoretical framework for intercultural communication. However, their goals are less ambitious. Their concern is “… *professional communication* between people who are members of different groups” (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 1995 p. xi; emphasis added). Thus they focus on a subset of types of interaction: interaction in formal professional contexts.

The Scollons are well aware of the problems posed by the complexity and multiplexity of cultural membership. As they put it:

> *"… not all cultural differences are equally problematical in intercultural communication. In fact, some cultural differences do not make any major difference from the point of view of discourse analysis. The reason for this is that cultures tend to be very large groupings with many sub-groupings.* There is hardly any dimension on which you could compare cultures and with which one culture could be clearly and unambiguously distinguished from another*." (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 1995 p. 161; emphasis added)*

For this reason, the authors focus on *discourse systems*. These are "smaller" than whole cultures and rather more homogeneous, and therefore (they argue) a better platform on which to build intercultural theory than the multi-dimensional scaffolding of Gudykunst and Kim (1997).

A discourse system involves four elements: a group of ideological norms, distinct socialisation processes, a regular set of discourse forms, and a set of assumptions about "face" relationships within the discourse system (cf. Ting-Toomey's work on face negotiation, discussed earlier in this paper).

Every individual is simultaneously a member of a large number of discourse systems, relating to all of the groups of which we are part. Many systems cut across cultural divides. There is a discourse system for, e.g., academics in the field of communication; discourse systems for gender; or for corporate culture. For Scollon and Wong Scollon, intercultural communication is better considered inter*discourse* communication. So they turn their attention to describing various significant discourse systems, focussing on those most often used in professional communication. If we understand the discourse systems used by others, we will communicate with others better.

This theory has several advantages over Gudykunst and Kim's. One arises from its narrower goals. Although there are many discourse systems, they are able to argue that a relatively small number predominate in professional communication. Thus the task of description is less daunting. The second advantage is that discourse systems, however many there may be, are all the same *kind* of animal, unlike the diverse dimensions of cultural description invoked by Gudykunst and Kim. Third, discourse analysis is clearly grounded in the actual interactions of people. Description is explicitly focussed on the discourse systems employed by individuals in specific contexts.

Despite these improvements, interdiscourse analysis is still faced with the complexity of humans in interaction. In particular, the problem of membership in a discourse system is similar to the problem of membership in a culture: how full, how equal, and how fixed is our

membership? Without imposing uniformity, the theory's capacity for clear analysis and prediction is severely limited.

The Fluidity of Culture: Evidence from Ethnographic Research

One of the most eloquent testimonies to the complexity of cultural membership (or discourse system membership, for that matter) is Ben Rampton's book Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents (1996). Rampton stands in the linguistic ethnographic tradition of Dell Hymes and John Gumperz, which has always been sceptical of reductionist treatments of cultural identity. This tradition lays importance on the social context of communication in assessing the role and function of culturally marked varieties of communication.

Rampton's fieldwork was among small ethnically mixed groups of adolescents in urban Britain. He discovered an extremely complex and fluid relationship between ethnicity and language, where members of these groups would move in and out of ethnically marked styles. Depending on context, the same ethnically marked language and symbolic repertoire was used variously to express solidarity or exclusion, to redefine cultural boundaries and reconstitute cultural identity. These findings, based on very extensive fieldwork, are highly suggestive. In Jan Blommaert's words:

> *"Rampton's analysis demonstrates that culture need not be 'traditional'. It need not be seen as something which is deposited in every member of a particular society. It can be made, changed, manipulated and dropped on the spot. The culture brought in by the adolescents serves as a joint and sharable set of resources, part of which is operated 'automatically' and part of which operates strategically in plays of contest and solidarity." (*Blommaert, 1998)

Ben Rampton's work is empirical evidence for what has been argued already in this paper: that in the real world, culture, and our membership in cultures, is a more complex matter than most empirical research and theory-building has allowed it to be. Where researchers *have* taken this into account it has been at the cost of coherence and theoretical power. Theorists of intercultural communication seem to be faced with Hobson's Choice.

Final Comments: the Good and the Bad

What is the importance, finally, of the field of intercultural communication for communication theory more generally and for the world?

Where intercultural communication falls down, or has so far, is in its attempts to be a science. Disagreement continues over the meaning and import of basic terms; partial theories abound, while rare attempts at a fully-featured paradigm seem obliged to choose

between good theory or realistic practice. In the soft world of communication, intercultural communication may just be the softest science of all.

However, if it is weak as a science, it has real merits as a *movement.* Perhaps the best thing about it is the way it has *acculturated* our thinking on communication. Communication studies took no real account of culture until the advent of Hall; now there is a wealth of research interest. This is of theoretical benefit, since whatever else may be salient in communication, and however vexed the notion of culture may be, it remains true that culture influences communication, and a full theory of communication must take account of it.

More importantly, that research has led to increasingly sophisticated investigations into cultures far removed from our own. In doing this it goes some way toward rectifying the imbalance in research attention, which has been heavily focussed on the developed West. The result is greater awareness, and potentially greater understanding. And if understanding is the key to good intercultural relationships, as most figures in the field maintain, then this can only be a good thing.

Glossary of Terms

Attributions	The causes individuals generate to make sense of their world.
Collectivism	Cover term for a complex cultural dimension. In collectivistic cultures, group goals are emphasised, belonging to groups is preferred to individual initiative and achievement.
Consensus	The degree to which people perform the same behavior.
Consistency	The degree to which a person performs a behavior on different occasions.
Discourse analysis	The analytic study of texts, written and oral; extended to complex systems of discourse. See in loc.
Distinctiveness	The degree to which a person performs different behaviors with different objects.
Ethnography of speaking	Field of sociolinguistics concerned with the distribution of speech varieties and the context of communication.
Face	The projected image of one's self in a relational situation.
Face concern	Whose face a person is primarily concerned with saving (self or other).
Face needs	Whether a person primarily wants to save positive or negative face.
Facework	Management of face concerns and face needs in interaction.
Negative face	Need for autonomy -- right to space, privacy, noninterference .
Positive face	Need for inclusion, respect, approval, appreciation
Face-restoration	Claim freedom & space for self. Face-restoration is emphasized in low-context cultures.
Face-saving	Signal respect for other's freedom & space.
Face-assertion	defend and protect one's own need to be included, respected, approved of, appreciated etc.
Face-giving	Defend and support the other's need to be included etc. Face-giving emphasized in high-context cultures.
Fundamental attribution error	Is when you blame other people for what happens to them, while you blame the situation for what happens to you.
Individualism	Cover term for a complex cultural dimension. In individualistic cultures, individuals' goals, initiative and achievement are emphasised.

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