

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURING - NEW VISTAS AND NEW POSSIBILITIES

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Nataša Bakić-Mirić

Department of Pre-Clinical Subjects, School of Medicine, University of Niš

Abstract. *The paper examines intercultural communication as the management of messages for creating meaning across cultures which are defined as codes of congruent messages, historically transmitted patterns of symbols, meanings, and rules. Nominal understanding of culture enlarges our understanding of what being human means and, moreover, expands moral action by locating our humanity within a world with an inherent potentiality. The nature of this emergent new morality and the theoretical implications, that is emergent quantum understanding of culture, brings to bear on intercultural theory and the phenomenon of culturing.*

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

1. INTRODUCTION

An emergent view in intercultural communication theory is challenging the commonly held view that cultures are stable and homogenous (see e.g. Belay 1993; Casmir, 1993; Dervin 1991; Martin and Nakayama 1999; Mc Phail, 1996; Rodriguez, 2002; Said, 2000; Shuter, 1993; Starosta, 1991). The common criticism is that we are masking the many points of conflict, dissent and diversity that permeate all cultures and, in doing so, masking the full complexity that cultures possess and even create. More importantly, such masking, 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: 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." (135) Therefore, we are demanding more complex understandings of how we constitute what cultures inherently possess, and devising means to have more and more writing about **placing** and **racing** and **differencing** instead of ethnicity and

race and difference as to afford a more heuristic understanding of the complexity, discontinuity and diversity that constitute race, ethnicity and difference (Dervin, 1991; Fry, 1998; Olmsted, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998; Said, 2000). In that sense, culturing 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 existing meanings, understandings and practices" (Rodriguez, 1998: 1).

2. RE-IMAGING COMMUNICATION

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. 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. But such an evolution is dependent on cultures promoting the rich interplay between meaning and ambiguity. This requires cultures realizing those rhythms that promote new meanings and interpretations while simultaneously allowing for the devolution of current meanings and interpretations. Integral to finding these rhythms is the promotion of ways of being that encourage the incomplete nature of meaning, that is, understandings of communication that promote interpretation rather than transmission. 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" (138). However, such an understanding sees communication as a medium phenomenon - communication conveys and articulates culture. Communication emerges as a representational rather than a way of embodying our worlds. In persisting in looking at communication in terms of transmission, we help perpetuate the view that cultures are stable and homogenous and thus amenable to reductionistic methodologies that strive to make complete and absolute claims.

Viewing communication as transmission - a bedrock assumption of popular definitions of culture - assumes that human beings are passive to the world. We are supposedly molded by prevailing discursive, communicative and performative practices. We conceptualize the relationship between culture and communication as causal and deterministic (Martin and Nakayama, 1999). We assume that cultural patterns can theoretically predict behavior. Accordingly, exaggerated notions of stability and homogeneity permeate many popular definitions of culture (Dervin, 1991; Martin and Nakayama, 1999; Moon, 1996; Deetz 1995) and argue that viewing communication as transmission misses the politics of self construction. It depoliticizes communication by masking issues of identity formation and blocking scrutiny of the deep ideological structures that constrict meaning creation process. For Deetz (1995), "Communication is about dialogic, collaborative constructions of self, other and the world in the process of making collective decisions. This includes the production and reproduction of personal identities, social knowledge and social structures." (107). Communication places and displaces us. It gives us an understanding of the world while simultaneously undercutting that understanding of the world. For instance, we never mirror experiences or our thoughts. Each retelling creates new experiences, new meanings, new understandings and, often, even new truths. In this way,

communication enables us, by affording us constant access to new experiences, new meanings and new understandings (Arthos, 2000; Gordon, 2000). Communication situates us in the world rather than being the means to represent the world. As Thayer (1995) notes, "In naming the world, we name ourselves; in explaining the world, we explain ourselves; in defining the world, we define ourselves" (9). Accordingly, in the last part of the paper emphasis is put on how culturing expands intercultural theory and heightens the foment emerging in intercultural communication studies that views culture in completely new and different ways (Belay, 1993; Casmir, 1993; Martin and Nakayama, 1999; McPhail, 1996; Shuter, 1993; Starosta, 1991).

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURING - NEW PERSPECTIVES -

Intercultural communication¹ teaches us that culture always changes because of internal and external influences. Communication, in that sense, is the most important quality for anyone to work on if they want to work or be part of an intercultural society. Communication between different cultures is a major topic for communication theorists. Today, both culture and communication have evolved considerably and have become interdependent on one another. Intercultural communication is not new; as long as people from different cultures have been encountering one another there has been intercultural communication. Intercultural communication 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.²

Understandably, intercultural communication theory has a deep tradition against ethnocentrism. Much good has come from upholding this tradition. But emergent observations of the world are forcing us to reckon with the claim that we have no ontological or epistemological ground upon which to make moral claims about different cultures. To look 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 cultures in the most interesting of ways.

Adopting a culturing standpoint reveals how the constant evolving and changing nature of cultures constantly undermines efforts to establish and sustain cultural hegemony.

¹ Intercultural communication is defined as a multidisciplinary 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 who naturally all have different definitions of 'intercultural communication'. For example Karlfried Knapp (1978) 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" (190). For 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.

² The 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 education, health care and other public services due to growing multicultural populations.

Culturing highlights the quantum 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. We ultimately come to understand that claims of cultural uniformity and stability will always be illusory. However, there will always be spaces where hope resides.

Culturing gives us a moral direction rather than a moral destination. It promotes 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**. 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, 1996:150). But culturing gives us more than a moral direction. It also acknowledges, even celebrates, the cultural commonalities that morally bound us together, and, in so doing, "lessens the threats of our [cultural] differences." All cultures are constantly grappling with the interplay between ambiguity and meaning and the other quantum tensions that this interplay sets off. Yet culturing demystifies cultures without destroying or infringing on their inherent complexity. It gives us a heuristic means to understand cultures without making us believe that our understandings can ever be or need to be complete and absolute. Cultural complexity makes for inherent mystery. But now we no longer need to be afraid of this mystery. It reflects the infinite potentiality that strengthens all cultures. 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 undermines neither 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. Hope resides in the points of disruption, disequilibrium, and nonconformity, that constantly destabilize the status quo. Hope also resides in the quantum tugging found in all organic systems. No culture can escape the quantum order of the world. Cultures that focus on ending ambiguity and diversity will eventually devolve. The quantum order of the world will tolerate only so much variability. In this way, though never certain, redemption is always possible; that is, there is always the possibility for more constructive and nonviolent ways of being together to emerge and make for new realities. 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, 2001:100).

4. CONCLUSION

Our understanding of culture assumes 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. Common understandings of culture mask the natural tensions that cultures possess and which are so vital for their prosperity. This, again, is a 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. Yet these tensions are natural catalysts for life's evolution and expansion. Through the evolution and expansion of our cultures our humanity evolves and expands. It seems therefore that our redemption and that of the world are sacredly mutually involved.

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INTERKULTURALNA KOMUNIKACIJA I KULTURALNOST NOVI POGLEDI I NOVE MOGUĆNOSTI

Nataša Bakić-Mirić

Rad istražuje interkulturalnu komunikaciju kao medijum za prenošenje poruka kroz različite kulture koje su definisane kao kongruentne poruke i istorijski prenosive šeme simbola, značenja i zakona. Nominalno razumevanje pojma kulture, omogućava naše bolje razumevanje šta znači biti ljudsko biće sa visokim stepenom moralnosti koja se postiže uz pomoć čovekove urođjene potencijalnosti. Priroda ove stečene nove moralnosti i njene teorijske implikacije dovode do svestranijeg razumevanja kulture što ide u prilog interkulturalnoj teoriji i fenomenu kulturalnosti.

Ključne reči: *interkulturalna komunikacija, kultura, nominalno, interkulturalna teorija, kulturalnost.*