

From a Theory of Certainty to a Theory of Challenge: Ethnography of an Intercultural Communication Class:

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Introduction

My first acquaintance with Dr. Ray Heisey was occasioned by my election as a paper reviewer for the International/Intercultural Communication Division of NCA in the same year he served as the division's convention planner. The IICD Division had received a huge number of submissions for that year and not being a methodical and organized person by nature, I needed more help than the others (or so I imagined) in getting the process done smoothly, in particular, in committing myself to definitive rankings instead of multiple ties (as I was want to do). Dr. Heisey was remarkably patient. At that time, he and I had not (yet) met in person, but only by e-mail, I found him extremely helpful but also a no-nonsense person who wouldn't tolerate shabby or less than excellent work. I would finally meet Dr. Heisey in person at the 8th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication in Hong Kong in the summer of 2001. A bit uncertain of the impression I had given him as one that he's had to go back and forth with to resolve some questions on my ranking of the papers. I was somewhat tentative in approaching and introducing myself to him. But meet him I finally did. Greeting him at the close of a session, I realized I need not have feared. Dr. Heisey exuded warmth, enthusiasm, and personal interest, thanking me for all the hard work I've done helping him in the division and, to my amazement, even remembering some remarks I had made earlier in another session during the open forum and expressing appreciation. Later, during one panel at an NCA convention, I would hear him cite an early essay I had written on indigenous anthropology as a graduate student which made me feel really honored. For someone with as much accomplishment and stature as a scholar as Dr. Heisey, humility and genuine interest in others (particularly those who are one's juniors) are a rare quality. Although I have never had the opportunity to sit in his classes, I imagine Dr. Heisey's students learn not only from his wealth of knowledge and experience but from the way he embodies in his being what it means to be truly human in one's dealings with others.

This piece is an early one I had written in graduate school several years ago. Although now dated, its importance to me lies in the way it marks a pivotal moment in my thinking about intercultural communication and what all is entailed (and is at stake) in its theorization. In a way, re-reading it reminded me once more of the powerful potential of intercultural communication to constitute life transforming experiences for both participants in the encounter—that is, if they let it. Such transformation is never automatic or guaranteed. Indeed it makes a difference in our teaching whether we are able to conceive of such encounters not primarily as destabilizing experiences to be “managed” and placed under

“control,” but as expansive lessons and teachable moments for learning different ways of being human. I offer it as my contribution to this festschrift volume for Dr. Heisey.

A Daunting Task

“Prepare to teach the most boring class ever and expect to get the worst student evaluations in your career as a graduate instructor,” I was warned. Com 463, as it was numbered in our department, is the upper division undergraduate course in intercultural communication theory and research. That Spring semester, I was assigned to teach it for the first time. The course seemed to have a reputation alright—certainly not the easiest to muster. In all fairness, I was told that part of it is just the “can-we-please-just-get-it-over-with” and “oh-hey-give-us-a-break-it’s-our-last-semester” sort of mentality that one finds prevalent among seniors in their last year of course work. But apparently, there was more to it than a mere case of senioritis; instructors who have taught the course earlier report having difficulty whipping up interest in the subject, much like a Sisyphusian endeavor, from what I gathered. I was determined to find out why.

The two required textbooks for the course (decided beforehand by the senior faculty course committee) were Gudykunst and Kim’s *Communicating with Strangers* (1997) and Samovar and Porter’s (SP) *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (1997). Although not part of the decision-making committee, I sought to approach the two texts with as much enthusiasm as though I had personally picked them myself; after all, knowing what is out there in the field is always good, even if sometimes all it gives one is something to push against. I must admit, though, that I found the continuing use of the word “strangers” in the Gudykunst and Kim title disturbing. Given the vastly differing conditions we live in today from those of the early 1900s when sociologist Georg Simmel originally developed the concept (and to whom Gudykunst and Kim acknowledge their indebtedness), the term would not only be theoretically problematic (what with the boundaries of “here” and “there” having become increasingly blurred even as there are those who would mark them more boldly. For that matter, even Gudykunst and Kim (1997, p. 24) do concede that the term is “somewhat ambiguous,” if only conceptually. Furthermore, the term “stranger” these days carries with it all kinds of pejorative connotations including spectres of xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments, rabid fears of difference, of “them” versus “us,” and the oft-unstated assumption, “we better learn to manage this otherness lest it disrupt our well-ordered existence and manage us.” Although never one to decide anything solely on the basis of “political correctness,” still I wondered whether the use of a such a loaded term might not be doing a disservice in representing to those outside the discipline what we, as intercultural communication scholars, do, especially appearing as it does in a major textbook such as that of Gudykunst and Kim.

This piece is not intended to be unduly critical of the work of these two prominent scholars in the field who no doubt have made tremendous contribution to our understanding of certain important aspects of intercultural communication. What happened in the class was that I fell flat on my face. I experienced a most disastrous semester with that first-time attempt to teach intercultural theory from a theoretically “balanced” and “neutral” stance (which I thought the textbook demanded), I felt I owed it to myself, if to no one else, to jot down my learnings and share them, and perhaps, out of the exercise, invite some exchange and discussion. After all, we build theory, as the French sociologist Jacques Ellul (1981) remarks, from dialogue and contestation, i.e., from the engagement of differing points of view (versus

merely "preaching to the choir," so to speak), setting up perspective by introducing an element of distance or contradiction (as implied in the "dia" in *dialogue* or *dialectics*." It is in this spirit that I write this thinkpiece. I call it "ethnography" not in the strict sense of the word; rather, my intent is to document my learnings from that first-time experience of failure, my subsequent restructurings and reframings of the course, the materials I ended up using the next time around and the results of all these in terms of students' responses. From this, I suggest ways of rethinking the larger issues of (what we take to be) the normative goal of intercultural communication theorizing. This is an issue I find important to (re-)consider in what for me is the most amazing and perilous of times: a time in which "culture," with all its contested meanings, has come to be the singular, if ambivalent, icon of the age—at once the site of governance, consumption, production, contestation, and assertions of new, old, and emergent/ing identities. If belatedly for our field, I feel it to be a time that calls for radically different ways of construing "the social" and the central role that communication plays in constituting it. And this I mean not only in the additive sense of allowing for a proliferation of paradigmatic perspectives in the field, such as is suggested by Starosta (1984) and sometimes unwittingly implied even by the likes of Martin and Nakayama (1997).¹ In a much more fundamental way, I feel that what we need today are approaches to theorizing that do not simply diplomatically ellide, but rather confront, issues of paradigmatic incommensurability in a way that results in productive conceptual transformation.

It is in this sense that I consider the questions I faced in my teaching of intercultural communication as having to do no longer with the straightforward task of "cultural description" (the usual expectation from a course such as this),² i.e., the commonsensical notion that "knowledge about other cultures" is all it takes to be a competent intercultural communicator. The more fundamental question for me is: what does it mean to do intercultural communication theorizing at the threshold of the new millennium – a historical conjuncture where the "Center" no longer holds; where commonsensical notions of "truth" and "falsehood," "right" and "wrong," "reality" and "illusion," can no longer be asserted by sheer appeal to "common sense," "reason" or authority? In other words, how do we now begin to speak about intercultural communication in ways that address the problematic of the instability and slipperiness of meaning? What counts for "knowledge" in our field? What are we wanting to accomplish when we do intercultural communication theorizing? What are the underlying politics of our theorizing and how do we, in the field, take stock of our own political embeddedness and involvement? What are we leaving out and excluding when we theorize intercultural communication in particular ways and what are we implicitly authorizing?

These questions I certainly do not raise in a vacuum, nor do I wish to ignore all the

¹ See, for example, Martin and Nakayama's (1997) discussion on the "Three Approaches to Studying Intercultural Communication" (Chapter 2), in particular, the section on "A Dialectical Approach to Understanding Culture and Communication". Although Martin and Nakayama do acknowledge the contradictions between and among the three theoretical approaches, there is a sense in which the tensions are too easily glossed over (i.e., not adequately engaged), in favor of what I find to be more of an additive/cumulative approach to the contributions of each—a view that ironically runs counter to the very principle of the dialectic that they otherwise espouse.

² As most of my students invariably wrote when asked to complete the sentence, "I came to this class expecting..." (in contrast to what they in fact came away with): "to learn a lot of information about various cultural groups and strategies in order to effectively communicate with them...."

ones who have raised them before me, for over the course of the field's history, there have certainly been numerous moments of such paradigmatic stirrings and shake ups when whatever had been the reigning discourse found challenge from oppositional thinking (hence, the now more or less accepted triple-paradigm division of intercultural communication into the "social scientific," the "interpretive" and the "critical"). Even now, a whole new breed of scholars (cf. Alcoff, 1991/92; Conquergood, 1991; Tanno & Jandt, 1993-94; Nakayama & Martin, 1993; Shome, 1996; Gonzales, Houston, Chen, 1997, among others) are pushing the limits of what can traditionally be conceived of as "issues in the field," crossing over and irreverently transgressing disciplinary boundaries into feminist studies, critical race theory, cultural/postcolonial studies and queer theory, among others. But these questions I raise again here only because in the classroom, face-to-face with the students' world of the everyday, one has the unprecedented task of engaging these issues in a living, practical context, i.e., in dialogue with students whose commonsense notion of things is often challenge enough for one to keep "thinking at [and beyond] the limits," i.e., beyond the seeming seamlessness of the *doxa* of received knowledge into the difficult zone of conflictual meanings and, simply, of multiple ways of seeing.

In what follows, I first present a critique of the model of theorizing one finds articulated in the Gudykunst and Kim (1997) text.³ This I follow with an account of students' responses to the material as well as that of my own. I end with a proposal for an alternative framework for theorizing intercultural communication in ways that I hope will respond more adequately to the theoretical questions posed here.

Meeting the "Stranger:" Getting a Handle on Gudykunst and Kim's Grand AUM Theory

The concept of the "stranger" as derived from the early work of sociologist Georg Simmel (writing in 1908) constitutes Gudykunst's and Kim's central analytical tool⁴ for looking at the dynamics of what is involved in the intercultural situation. In a nutshell, the term "stranger," for Gudykunst and Kim, suggests a peculiar state of affairs where you have a person who belongs structurally to another space, i.e., whose "rightful" place is "elsewhere," but who has now left that space and come "near." A person living elsewhere is not (yet) a stranger as such, technically speaking; she acquires the status upon leaving that primary space (of belonging) and draws "near." In other words, for as long as that "other" person remains in her designated place, (i.e., over "there") an "outsider" would normally pose no concern (since one is not then compelled to deal with her). But the moment the outsider leaves her "designated" domain and draws near, at that very instance, she becomes a "stranger" by definition. By entering a space that belongs to another, the "stranger" forces a situation where those occupying that space will now have to "deal" with her.

This contradictory position of the "stranger" is what for Gudykunst and Kim defines the intercultural situation. The ambiguity arising from the disruption of the "normal" order(ing) of things with the stranger's drawing near connotes a threat or danger that then gives rise to the cognitive phenomenon of "uncertainty," along with its affective equivalent,

³The Samovar and Porter (1997) text is not given as much scrutiny here if only for the reason that its latest edition appears to embrace a much less unified and monolithic paradigmatic position, what with the inclusion of articles that depart from a strictly structural-functionalist and behaviorist perspective.

⁴Both authors use the construct in their separate individual work (cf. Gudykunst, 1995; Kim, 1995).

“anxiety.” Both of these responses to the “stranger-come-near” are provoked by the stranger’s “strangeness,” i.e., from the fact that in the face of the unfamiliar, one is stripped of one’s ability to predict and, consequently, plan for, and anticipate one’s own response to, the stranger’s behavior. In effect, when one is unable to “place” someone within one’s classificatory scheme, one is bound to experience discomfort and uneasiness, a loss of control, and a much diminished sense of confidence in one’s ability to “handle” the unfamiliar situation in a competent manner. It is this state of affairs that then prompts the person to seek for ways to manage the ambiguity of the intercultural communication situation. One major way by which individuals try to accomplish this is by seeking out information that makes prediction of the other person’s behavior possible. With prediction comes the possibility of control and with control, the reduction of uncertainty and anxiety, the outcome of which is then thought to push the intercultural communication process in a generally “positive” direction (of course what is not addressed is the question: “positive” for whom?).

Mary Douglas, in her classic work, *Purity and Danger* (1966), describes a similar situation with the “other.” She notes that all our classificatory categories, e.g., inside/outside, black/white, near/far, strange/familiar, are in fact a way of keeping “matter in its place,” of preserving the social order so that what is “impure,” or does not belong, may be kept from “polluting” or disrupting the normative boundaries of our culture. And so what we do to maintain the existing order is to police those boundaries, punish transgressions, and seek to re-place those things that had gotten “out-of-place,” as it were. For when things are displaced, we no longer know what meanings to read, what predictions to make, thereby throwing our world in utter disarray, that is, unless and until we are able to restore it back to order. Hall (1997), paraphrasing Douglas, picks up on her vivid analogy:

Dirt in the garden is fine, but dirt in one’s bedroom is ‘matter out of place’—a sign of pollution, of symbolic boundaries being transgressed, of taboos broken. What we do with ‘matter out of place’ is to sweep it up, throw it out, restore the place to order, bring back the normal state of affairs. (p. 236)

He concludes, “The retreat of many cultures towards ‘closure’ against foreigners, intruders, aliens and ‘others’ is part of the same process of purification” (p. 236).

But whereas Douglas and Hall seek to highlight and question the whole matter of such boundary-keeping impulse in all cultures, Gudykunst and Kim, for their part, appear rather to unproblematically validate it. By devoting a great bulk of their work to “discovering” (thus assuming the “ontological givenness” of) those “dimensions of cultural variability” that are likely to influence the communication process with the “stranger,” such classificatory schemas⁵ get easily turned into reified categories. Such essentialized group characteristics then devolve easily into stereotyping. Of course, an avowed rationale for going to such great lengths to “place” cultures within these classificatory categories is to develop cultural “awareness” and “sensitivity” towards members of those cultures and adapt or adjust one’s communication patterns accordingly. But it doesn’t take much reflection to note that the overriding purpose is more instrumental, i.e., to gain “predictability” and “control” of the intercultural communication situation. For having identified predictability of behavior as “an important issue in communication across cultures,” Gudykunst (1995, p. 9) concludes that this

⁵E.g., Dividing up cultures into “individualistic/collectivistic,” “low context/high context,” “high power distance/low power distance,” “feminine/masculine,” etc.

then must be *the* desired and desirable goal in intercultural communication (albeit with the little caveat that one must retain just a tad of “novelty” and mystery to keep one’s interest going and prevent boredom should the “other” become totally and wholly predictable). The goal of reducing anxiety and uncertainty, then, in Gudykunst’s and Kim’s scheme, serves as the overarching explanation as to why people communicate in intercultural situations. Under this scheme, all communication with the “stranger” is reduced to an information-seeking move designed to “manage” the ambiguous situation and, ultimately, to minimize the anxiety and uncertainty presumed to characterize the intercultural communication encounter; hence, the Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM) model of intercultural communication.⁶

Out of this determination (and building on the work of social psychologists working in this tradition, e.g., Riezler, 1960; Schneiderman, 1960; Stephan & Stephan, 1989; Tuan, 1979, among others) comes the most amazing elaboration of axiomatic statements, (94 to be exact) covering the posited relationships between and among an equally impressive number of “variables” in the intercultural situation. Perusing such a daunting list of propositions along with their accompanying explanations, ranging from the most simple to the most complex, one cannot but be impressed indeed by the productivity of the concept. Just to give a characteristic sample (for those of us working in other paradigms that tend to gloss over and dismiss this important tradition in our field), consider the following:

Axiom 19: An increase in our understanding of similarities and differences between our groups and strangers’ groups will produce an increase in our ability to manage our anxiety and our ability to accurately predict their behavior.

Axiom 20: An increase in the personal similarities we perceive between ourselves and strangers will produce an increase in our ability to manage our anxiety and our ability to accurately predict their behavior. Boundary Condition: Understanding group differences is critical only when strangers strongly identify with the group.

Axiom 21: An increase in our ability to categorize strangers in the same categories in which they categorize themselves will produce an increase in our ability to accurately predict their behavior. (Gudykunst and Kim, 1997, pp. 32-33)

Curiously enough, most intercultural theories that have dominated the field since shortly after the brief period of the intercultural pioneers (E.T. Hall, Trager, Birdwhistell, etc.)—whose work was given more to the Geertzian type of “thick” (cultural) descriptions—would fall mostly under this type of theorizing invariably referred to as “behavioristic” or “variable analytic”—theories such as Communication Accomodation Theory (CAT, Gallois, et al., 1995; Giles, et. al., 1987), Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT, Burgoon, 1978, 1983, 1986, 1992, 1995), Theory of Conversational Constraints (Kim, M., 1995), in addition to Gudykunst’s AUM Theory. In essence, the goal of this kind of theorizing is to seek to get a handle on the intercultural interaction process and the dynamics involved by identifying the host of “variables” presumed to impinge on the communicative interaction in any given situation and to plot the relationships (construed mostly in causal and deterministic terms) that are posited to exist between these so-called “variables” and the intercultural communication process. It

⁶The theory is basically an extension of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (cf. Berger & Calabrese, 1975) in interpersonal communication to intercultural contexts.

then reduces these identified relationships to a (hardly parsimonious) list of theoretical propositions or hypotheses that in turn are used to test for possible variability in a variety of contexts. Placed within an organizing framework, these propositions then become the basis for predicting and prescribing what is likely to count for an “appropriate” response given the conditions of a specific communicative situation. Take the case of the following examples:

“Violations [are] most beneficial for those of highest reward value (i.e., competent/high-status members), moderately beneficial to those of mixed reward value (competent but low status), and a liability for those of lowest reward value. (EVT; Burgoon, 1995, p. 213)

“Individuals with high independent as well as simultaneously high interdependent self construals will show high concern for relational as well as clarity constraints, whereas individuals with either low-independent/high-interdependent or high-independent/low-interdependent self construals will tend to favor one set of constraints at the expense of the other.” (*Theory of Conversational Constraints*; Kim, M., 1995, p. 160)

“When speakers desire the social approval of their interlocutors or to identify with them or their groups, desire a high level of communication clarity and comprehension, desire to meet the perceived communicative, relational, or emotional needs of their interlocutors, or desire equal-status role relations with their interlocutors, they are likely to attempt to attune positively (converge) to the communicative characteristics they believe to belong to their interlocutors.... (CAT; Gallois, et.al., 1995, p. 144)

Such behavior-centered, variable-analytic theorizing, regardless of its proponents’ acknowledgment of the “complexity” of the intercultural communication situation, rests on a number of unproblematized assumptions: 1) that cultures can be reduced to a set of functional and structural regularities identifiable as “rules” or “norms” that give particular human groups their unique “essential” group characteristics; 2) that such rules are an ontological “given” in the culture (i.e., the equivalent of an assumption of psychological “traits” and “characteristics” on the personal individual level; 3) that “culturally-sensitive” communication means knowing how to adapt one’s communication patterns to the “norms” of the group that one is interacting with at any given moment; and 4) that in order to do so, one must “know” as much of the governing “rules” and “norms” of the “other” as possible in order to increase the likelihood of “predictability” and “control” of the intercultural communication interaction⁷ and that would then allow one, in turn, to frame one’s own response accordingly. But because social and cultural phenomena are often messy and far from simple (to say more about this fourth and last identified assumption), what usually get generated in the process are seldom simple straightforward statements of the “rules” or

⁷ As Gudykunst (1995) explicitly states in this regard, “Predictability is necessary to know how to expect other people to behave...” (p. 12). For a stark example of these assumptions, see entire chapter 3 of the Gudykunst and Kim (1997) text (pp. 53-83), in particular, the discussion on individualism-collectivism, personality orientations, self-construals, high context-low context communication, Hofstede’s dimensions of cultural variability, in fact, the entire chapter right through to the end!

“norms” operating in each instance but rather torturous hypotheses entailing (be)labored accounts of all the elaborations possible with any one single rule based on any number of various situational contingencies. Bourdieu (1977) calls this theoretical practice “methodological objectivism” (pp. 72 ff.). Bourdieu (1977), in critiquing such methodological objectivism, speaks scathingly of the “fallacies of the rule” (pp. 22-32), noting in this regard how, in the obsessive preoccupation and calculation of probabilities, (“each constructed *against* spontaneous dispositions”) *necessity [is] made into a virtue*” (p. 77, underscoring in the original). This is the curse I see in all behavioristic attempts to “fix” (both in the sense of remedy[ing] and making manage-able) or to “capture” (make sense of) the phenomenon of human communication. For, aside from the impossibility of accounting for all the practical enactments, inventions, and infinite elaborations possible with any one given “norm,” thanks to the dynamic restlessness and perversity of human desire and imagination, transformation—should this be the goal of our theorizing—seldom comes from a willful determination to change one’s behavior by the tedious tending of the “norm” (the failure of the Kantian imperative) but only from a different way of seeing.

Nonetheless, I find it important to underscore here that the problem with methodological objectivism, (not to belabor those trite criticisms), is not so much in its patent lack of validity, but precisely in what appears to be the very givenness and transparency of its “observations.” For how many, for instance, can argue with the “fact” that “cultures” do possess distinguishing patterns and characteristics that in the first place make it possible at all to speak of them as such? How many can question that these differing patternings and structurings of social life do not give rise to variability in communicative practices? That “collectivistic” cultures do not communicate, argue, view life, etc. one way and “individualistic” cultures another? But precisely—and there goes the rub—in presuming to have succeeded in so capturing “the” “truth” about human communicative behavior, we forget its constituted nature and unproblematically fix, naturalize, normalize, essentialize its presumed given “nature” into a foregone necessitarian conclusion. Thus, in the comfort and assurance of so-called objective “findings” and the success of our “predictive” and “management-ability” vis-a-vis the situation with the “other” in intercultural encounters, what is originally posited as an “is,” in the blink of an eye, becomes an “ought,” turning a depicted social order into a normative one. And we wonder how (and why) it is that changing things in our world is such a daunting endeavor. Why such blatantly discredited attitudes in intercultural communication as stereotyping, ethnocentrism, racism, discrimination, prejudice are the hardest to eliminate and the easiest to reduce to a mere matter of “political correctness.” For what other more “commonsensical” conclusion can one draw, to give a commonplace example, from, say, a criminal or a shoplifter’s “profile” other than the obvious? Indeed, who can argue, given the weight of overwhelming “evidence” attesting to the “fact,” when sales clerks would then, as a result, follow around a person of color in a way they would not a white customer after having been briefed on the “typical” suspects’ (essentialized) “profile”? Again, I raise these issues here not to dismiss behaviorism wholesale, but only to invite some hermeneutical suspicion towards the all-too obvious givenness and transparency of behaviorism’s conclusions. As Bourdieu (1977) underscores,

Methodological objectivism [is] a necessary moment in all research, [but] by the break with primary experience and the construction of objective relations which it

accomplishes, [it] demands its own supercession” (p. 72).⁸

To situate this critique within the context of my Intercultural Communication Theory classroom experience, let me cite some of assumptions embedded in the students’ responses to this way of thinking about intercultural communication.⁹ One that surfaced quite early on in the semester is the attitude that this “information”¹⁰ was something to learn and to commit to memory; unfortunately, only for test-taking purposes. Hence, the oft-repeated complaint, “This is way too much information, *just what exactly* do you want us to learn? What type of test are you going to give? Do you expect us to learn all the terms and the ‘technical details’? Will there be a study guide for the finals?” While these are not uncommon queries among students used to ready-made and fastfood-type solutions to life’s most pressing problems, still it makes one wonder if there is not, in the very way we approach the teaching of communication (since we’re talking here of communication majors), a subtle or not so subtle reinforcement of the very habits (of commodification, sadly extended even to the notion of education) that we seek to displace in our students. Another revealing attitude is that the learned “information” constitutes “authoritative knowledge.” Why? “Because it’s so highly-technical, you have to know a lot of terms; it must be expert knowledge.” And with this then comes the added panic and pressure to all the more “memorize *accurately*” so as not to miss any of the important “information.” A third and corollary assumption is that such information is something to be passively “received,” rather than actively engaged, i.e., whenever I had tried to push students to think critically about the material, invariably what I got was the attitude, “Why would anyone contradict ‘expert’ opinion? Just accept it, that’s what you do. That’s why *they* write the books and *we* read them.” “Besides, a lot of it is commonsensical anyway, so you just try and follow the ‘helpful advice.’” And finally, especially among those studious ones who tend to respond well to such method of learning, i.e., those who work hard to learn well what they are told to learn, a fourth and final assumption is reflected in the response that “The material is OK. At least, coming out of a course like this, you know some definite information [that word again].” “There is no vagueness or ambiguity.” “The information is clear. You feel safe because you’re told exactly what there is to know.”

You bet I was tearing my hair hearing these responses over and over again, throughout that first disastrous semester. One thing good that came out of the experience, though, is the way I saw so starkly for the first time why the so-called “received” view is not particularly conducive to generating enthusiasm in the classroom. Much of it, I realized, has to do with the fact that positive knowledge has a way of finishing up the conversation, like a period stopping the flow of further thought in a sentence. For thought stops where answers had been provided and further curiosity rendered nil where the only task left is to apply the formula or re-produce what has already been patently tested before. A question, an interrogative sentence, on the other hand, has the restlessness of an unfinished sentence, the in/per/sistence of a curious thought that probes and never stops probing until it finds insight. But if not all that interesting, at least what the “received view” does offer that the critical paradigm doesn’t is the comfort and ease of assurance, of being provided a sense of

⁸ Cf. Rosaldo’s (1989/1992) critique of the same normalizing, objectifying practice in classical ethnography in chapter two, “After Objectivism.”

⁹ These responses are culled, sometimes verbatim (not always) from students’ comments both in the classroom and outside during office consultations.

¹⁰ I thought that was curious how students liked to refer to it as that-*information*.

“guarantee,” albeit, if only the guarantee of ideologically-conjured certainty and determination.

A Theory of Challenge

What then might be an alternative approach to intercultural theorizing? What I present in the following are insights from the critical tradition that I tried to introduce to my students, albeit with little success, during the second half of that first semester.¹¹ It is one that I have since refined and developed into a meta-critical framework with quite astounding results in the subsequent semesters. After that dismally failed experiment which almost drove the students to seek cover in the safety of more behavioristic theorizing that earlier on had nearly bored them to tears, I abandoned the notion of a co-equal, take-no-stand neutral presentation of the “paradigm wars” in intercultural communication (the interpretive and the critical I heuristically lumped together onto one side of the debate and the social-scientific, behaviorist, variable analytic paradigm, on the other). What I ended up doing is a more forthright declaration of my own theoretical commitments, staking my own claim in the critical paradigm, *but at the same time taking care not to use such position to annihilate, but rather engage*, the other paradigms, highlighting the tensions and controversies in forcing myself to learn always to think “at the limits.”

In coming up with an alternative framework for theorizing intercultural communication, two main questions guided me: 1) what are ways of talking about intercultural communication issues that move away from essentialized/ing descriptions of the “other”? and 2) what alternative goals or values other than the management of anxiety and uncertainty and the goal of prediction and control should we aim for in our intercultural communication theorizing? In addressing these two questions, I came up with a cluster of concepts or problematics that I thought captures the framework for a more critical approach to intercultural communication. These critical concepts I turned into **topical units** in constructing my new syllabus, namely:

- The principle of **dialectic**
- The problem of **representation** (process of knowledge production, how we know what we know, constitution of meaning, stereotyping, labelling and classification)
- **Discourse** (how ways of speaking construct images of the “other” e.g., in colonial discourse, anthropological literature, traveller’s tales, discourses of modernity, etc.)
- **Historicization** versus **essentializing** descriptions (processual analysis versus classical ethnography; politics of “description” and “objective” analysis)
- **Culture as hegemony** and culture as a **site of governance** (culture in the context of global capitalism and global transformations)
- **Identity** and **difference**
- **Race** and **racial classification** and
- **Critical multiculturalism**

I shall spend the rest of this paper talking about how I bring together the individual concepts and use them use them to differently organize and frame the subject of intercultural

¹¹A failure only in the way that I had sought to introduce it with half-hearted commitment fearing the charge of “bias” and overzealous advocacy.

communication theorizing. I lay them out here as a narrative of the process I went through in my thinking as I sought out ways to rouse myself and my students to a more critical engagement of the issues in the field against the backdrop of my previous experience of failure during that fateful first semester.

I commented earlier that one huge problem I encountered vis-a-vis the traditional social scientific paradigm was the difficulty of provoking critical thought in my students when thaterspective was adopted as the primary viewing lens. One reason for this as I had mentioned is that when things are presumed to be “given” in nature, there doesn’t seem to be much else left to do but to “receive” them or give one’s assent to them. Nothing, I think, attests to this better than the repeated use of the word “information” by the students, indicating that the presumption of “fact” can only call for “acceptance” as the fitting response since “facts” are just the way things are; it makes no sense to argue about them, so the unconscious reasoning goes. While we must, by all means, acknowledge the drive to certainty as a powerful impetus in all human beings, the paradox of it is that it is the elusiveness of that drive’s final satisfaction that ultimately creates movement and that fosters dialogue. For even within the context of communication, once agreement (consensus) or certainty is reached, any further talk becomes superfluous. Contrary then to the overarching call for *prediction, control* and *certainty* in the Gudykunst and Kim framework, my greatest burden was precisely how to encourage students to look upon uncertainty as something not to be gotten rid of or minimized but as, potentially, the ultimate pedagogue. One way I saw to accomplish this is by introducing them to the principle of **dialectic**.¹² I will spend a considerable bit of time talking about this concept relative to the others inasmuch as it sets the general framework for my approach to intercultural communication theorizing.

A very helpful (and inspiring) discussion of the principle of the dialectic is one given by Jacques Ellul (1981). Ellul, in much of his own sociological work, calls for a “theory of challenge” (p. 297). In his essay, he underscores several key notions about the principle of the dialectic. First is the notion of dialectic being a holistic way of “grasping the real” (in contrast to the Hegelian dialectic of ideas), meaning, since reality (or life as we know it in the everyday) “includes...contradictory elements...[and] a permanent process of change” (p. 294), our theorizing must likewise reflect the same if we are to account for the “real” in its totality. Second is the notion that the transformation of the two contradictory factors in dialectic (i.e., thesis and antithesis) into a third entails “neither the suppression of one of the two, nor a confusion, nor an addition” (p. 294) but rather a “creative synthesis” (p. 295). Here, contrary to Martin and Nakayama’s (1997; 1998a; 1998b) somewhat facile conception of dialectic where they draw up a ready grid of “dialectical samples” in the intercultural situation, Ellul emphasizes that there is nothing trite or ordinary about the dialectical process. A “truly” dialectical synthesis, according to Ellul, is never just a product of an intellectual synthesis; rather, he notes that “when we go on to the minute demonstration or ‘unpeeling’ of the operations of intellectual analysis, the synthesis escapes our comprehension” (p. 297). A disturbing aspect in Martin and Nakayama’s conceptualization is the way that, in their hands, dialectic appears to be turned into just another cognitive tool with which to once again slice up reality (intercultural communication phenomenon) into another set of categories, only this

¹²Martin & Nakayama (1997; 1998a; 1998b) have proposed a similar framework for studying culture and communication. My own thinking, however, tends to have a totally different conception from their own, more a product of my own autobiographical transformation and more akin to what Ellul (1981) describes in his essay and which I use here to illuminate my own experience with the concept.

time in the form of “dialectics” (e.g., “cultural-individual dialectic,” “personal-social/contextual dialectic,” “differences-similarities dialectic,” etc.). Ellul, for his part, speaks of the process in very different terms: as a moment of “achieving the intuition of understanding,” a process which is “inexplicable” (p. 297), a truly transformative moment. Such a moment, he notes, comes not through simple cognitive means or by willful determination, but rather *creatively*, much like the birth of a poem and *violently*, “with explosions and acts of destruction” (p. 297), arising as it does out of the seemingly irresolvable contradiction of a crisis moment.

Third—and this I find to be most compelling—the notion of what Ellul (1981) calls “the positivity of negativity” (p. 295), taking off from Hegel’s own view. What he means by this is that between the positive and the negative prongs of the dialectic, it is the negative prong that challenges, that initiates change. And change is important because without the possibility of change, there can only be the inexorable march of a repetitive definitive (positive) order. Ellul notes in this regard,

This is essential, for if the positive remains alone, it remains unchanged: stable and inert. A positive—for example, an uncontested society, a force without counterforce, a [person] without dialogue, an unchallenged teacher, a church with no heretics, a single party with no rivals—will be shut up in the indefinite repetition of its own image. It will live in satisfaction of what was produced once, and will see no reason to change. Facts, circumstances, and events that might be contrary will be no more than annoying embarrassments for it. (p. 295)

The fourth idea is that there is no automaticity to the operation of dialectic—that although there may be many contradictory elements that abound in every social or political context, not all are constitutive of the dialectical process. For that matter, not all are interesting and Ellul would have us note keenly those that do (constitute a truly dialectical moment) in order that we may interpret their present relation and “foresee their possible evolution” (p. 295). As to the role of human subjects in the process, he cautions, “Dialectic is not a machine producing automatic results. It implies the certitude of human responsibility and therefore a freedom of choice and decision.” (p. 297).

It is in this very different spirit of the dialectic that I found possible an escape from the relentlessly mechanistic and deterministic objectivism of the behaviorist paradigm. In terms of its implications for intercultural communication theorizing, I see how, in the very heart of the intercultural encounter, in that destabilizing moment of encounter and contestation of the incommensurable elements of cultures and systems of thought, there lies the possibility of a truly dialectical moment. It is this potential for transformation in the intercultural communication encounter – versus the taming of difference – that I strive to explore fully in my theorizing of intercultural communication.

Today, I use the foregoing notion of the dialectic to teach my students the notion of transformative learning. I warn them not to be surprised or terribly frightened should they experience crisis or disorientation at any point in the course of the semester because the sense of groundlessness or confusion is intended to be part of their learning process. (Of course on the first day when I do this prep talk, I have learned to anticipate quite a few walkouts and transfers from those unable to begin even to imagine what this strange teacher from outer space must have in store for them with such dire warnings.)

From this, I move my students on to the course's central problematic: the problem of **representation**. Here, we problematize the whole notion of "knowledge" in intercultural communication (particularly knowledge about the "other") and how all knowledge, including mainstream, authoritative "knowledge," is itself constructed in "representation." We look at the three theories of representation, i.e., the *reflective*, the *intentional* and the *constructionist* approaches to meaning and how the first and second of these theories have been traditionally privileged in commonsensical understandings. The whole purpose of this unit is to make visible the often invisible and taken-for-granted process of knowledge and meaning-creation in language and representation. Here, we deconstruct the myth of unmediated knowledge (thus, students learn to make distinctions between "knowledge" and "knowledge-claims") and begin to grasp the difficult notion of the instability of meaning in communication. They begin to see in quite profound ways how these competing views on the constitution of meaning and knowledge in theories (as systems of representation) lie at the core of the debate between the old (positivist) paradigm and the new (critical) paradigm. A helpful resource I use in this regard is Stuart Hall's (1997) chapter on "The Work of Representation."

From representation, we move on to the notion of **discourse**. We talk about the ways in which certain modes of speaking produce meaning and construct images of the "other." Here, we begin to look more closely at the ways in which **power** plays into our discursive constructions and how dominant ways of speaking construct their subjects and places them into certain "subject positions" in relation to others. An excellent case study for this unit is an essay, once again, by Stuart Hall (1992) titled, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power." In this essay, Hall gives a historicized account of the political formation of the discourse of "the West and Rest" and shows how this discursive construction became naturalized in the western popular imagination. By situating the discourse within the damning contexts of imperial(ist) exploration and the whole racist discourse of "orientalism," he explodes the assumption of innocence and neutrality in the encounter of the West with "the Rest" particularly since 1492. An accompanying film I use for this unit is "Savage Acts" (Bender & Brown, 1995), a 30-minute documentary of the US's repressed imperialist history at the turn of the twentieth century showing a juxtaposition of the discourses of the US "culture wars" fought in the trade fair exhibits in Louisiana and elsewhere with the actual military wars waged abroad. A deeply disturbing portrayal for most, the film serves as excellent material for talking about the discursive politics of the visual (i.e., the visual enactments in the trade fair exhibits of the discourses of "Benevolent Assimilation," "Manifest Destiny," and the "White Man's Burden") and how they articulated powerfully with the conquest of indigenous peoples with their assumed barbarity, backwardness, and need for tutelage. This is the moment in the course where students are gripped by a first-time realization of their complicity—through ignorance—in the perpetuation of reified assumptions of the "West and the Rest" in their own commonsense imaginations. The shock that comes from exposure to this heretofore repressed historical memory¹³ becomes so totally disconcerting for many that it is here where the process either works "transformatively" (through acceptance of the challenge to question the limits of their patriotic loyalties), or is resisted actively (the latter often in the form of concluding that this is just another "white-bashing" instructor).

Two chapters from Rosaldo's (1989/1992) book, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking*

¹³ From the students' own accounts, there seems to be no denying that the "official" US narrative for the most part has no history of imperialism.

of *Social Analysis* take us to the next unit in the syllabus, i.e., **historicization** versus **essentializing** descriptions. Here, we build on all the concepts from the previous units to learn more about the easy temptation to objectify cultures and how such a tendency is also commonly found in classical ethnographic practice. Taking off from Rosaldo's notion of "processual analysis" in contrast with the analytical method of "classical ethnography," students are helped to appreciate what it means to "put culture into motion" (one of Rosaldo's chapter titles) in their own thinking and ways of speaking about "others." In the focus on description as a historical process, the major concepts of representation and discourse all come together and are further reinforced in this unit.

By the time we get to the next unit conceptualizing **culture as hegemony** within the context of **global transformations**, the students would have gotten a fairly good grasp of the general framework we are using and find it relatively easy to follow. For this unit, I use Hebdige's (1993) article with the same title for the first concept and Hall's (1997b) essay, "The Centrality of Culture: Notes on the Cultural Revolutions of Our Time" for the second. Central to this unit is an understanding of how culture as a "system of representation" becomes the "site of hegemonic struggle"¹⁴ in this global age of electronic revolutions that at once enable and constrain the shape and outcomes of that hegemonic struggle. Additionally, in looking at the global context of intercultural communication interactions in this late twentieth century, we also examine the ways in which culture, through what are called the "culture industries" (Hollywood, Disneyland, advertising, media, etc.), becomes a site of production, consumption and regulation. This latter once again brings on a sense of crisis among us all, this time as we begin to see the ways in which our very own subjectivities become governed, disciplined, and commodified through the regulation of personal desires and the creation, through relentless media advertising, of artificial wants. And what has all this got to do with intercultural communication? These global processes (of culture regulation, consumption, production, etc.) we find to be the everyday context of our constructions of "subjectivity," "selfhood," and notions of "otherness." This then takes us right up to the next unit.

In this new unit, questions of **identity and difference** focus us once again on the thematic of representation, this time within the global context(s) of "subjectivity" in the face of the increasing deterritorialization of cultural spaces and the problematization and de-privileging of the entity, "the nation" as a primary marker of (cultural) identities. A corollary focus in this regard is a historical tracing of modernity's turn of the spotlight on the central construct, "identity" with the rise in the US beginning with the 1960s of what are now called the "new social movements" (cf. Woodward, 1997). The theoretical concepts we use throughout our analysis are the notions of "essentialism" versus "anti-essentialism/constructionism" as they play into the processes of identity formation. In particular, we examine the ways in which these differing approaches to identity construction constitute differing ways of marking the cultural and territorial boundaries of the "self" as groups struggle for recognition amidst differing power locations and positionings of subjects.

The unit on **race and racial classification** looks at the construction of "racial

¹⁴ Given that news of the White House "scandal" was raging during one semester's class discussion on this unit, we had an ideal example and illustration of how the interplay of power, ideology and the construction and representation of the news in various media come together in a hegemonic struggle to constitute the "truth" based on partisan interests in order to win public opinion.

difference” in societies as a form of instrumental regulation. One of the quintessential expressions of this, according to Goldberg’s (1997) chapter on “Taking Stock: Counting by Race,” is the U.S. Census. In a provocative and incisive analysis of the census “discourse” on racial classification, students are treated to a revealing look at how discourses acquire authority and power through official state legislation and acts of governmental regulation as well as how racist notions become reified and their exclusionary intent covered over or made invisible through the normalizing practices of administrative authority. Along with Goldberg’s article, a dense but very helpful resource I use for this unit is the Classroom Edition of Stuart Hall’s (1996) lecture on “Race, the Floating Signifier.” In this video, Hall walks us through a carefully argued and brilliant analysis of how race, as a discursive construct, functions as an indeterminate marker of difference. Articulated to power, Hall notes how race serves as a commonsensical naturalized instrument for keeping a racialized social order in place—an analysis which unpacks for us the intricate inner workings of racism and racist ideology. An important notion that frames his conclusion is the contrast he makes between a “politics *with* guarantee” (underlying the whole invented biological notion of “race” and “racial categorization”) versus a “politics *without* guarantee”—a reiteration of the principle of the dialectic which repudiates any claim to a final capture of the “truth,” through a forcible imposition of a singular ideological definition of “truth” and “meaning” in discourse and representation.

Finally, the unit on **critical multiculturalism** brings all the issues in the foregoing units into focus in examining how it might be possible to live together in multicultural societies without contributing to the reigning impulse to erase difference. Parekh’s (1997) essay in this regard explores various forms and conceptions of “multiculturalism” as articulated in actual examples from the experiences and experiments of various multicultural movements in three national societies: the US, Britain and Canada. We close this unit with a sense not of having posed any definitive answers to the problematic of what it means to live together with difference amidst the challenges of a global century but rather with a deep respect for, and appreciation of, the complexity and enormity of the task before us as practitioners, students, and scholars, of intercultural communication.

These units constitute the critical framework I use to then introduce various intercultural communication readings ranging from book chapters and articles from Gudykunst and Kim (1997) , Samovar and Porter (1997) and a reader edited by Martin, Nakayama & Flores (1998b). To complement the theoretical learnings in class, for their major research project, I ask the students to analyze the problematic of identity and representation within the context of a particular group of their own choosing. Using the critical concepts learned in class, I require them to perform the following critical project: 1) Identify dominant discourses or popular knowledges and/or stereotypical images about their chosen group; 2) Investigate where such knowledges and images come from and document their process of construction; 3) Identify and describe these images’ means and process of circulation and naturalization in the popular imagination; 4) Find out what the effects of these images are on the group’s self-concept and identity; 5) Document any attempts or efforts from the group to resist/change/transform/reject such knowledges or images (if any) and how effective these efforts are; and 6) Note the sources of such alternative image-constructions and their means of circulation and promotion.

Epilogue

One of the oft-repeated objections against the practice of critical theory that I have heard is the fact that critical theory is only “good in critiquing,” but never in providing any “real” answers to the criticisms raised. I feel this to be a fair assessment, and there is a good reason for my saying so. I, for one, do not believe in providing answers, that is, except for myself. As one psychologist friend admonished a long time ago and whose admonition remains with me to this day, “Dare not get into the habit of dispensing advice (i.e., prescribing solutions) to others, for the only advice you can give is that which you give to yourself.” How true! And it is also the only one that will work in the long run. In my experience with teaching intercultural communication theory from a framework of criticism, I find that without students themselves beginning to experience that restlessness in their souls and raise questions that really matter to them (and not because they anticipate getting tested on them), no amount of dishing out positive “answers” and “solutions” really matters in the long run—those things they leave at the classroom door the last time they walk out at the end of their final exam. A theory of challenge and criticism, on the other hand, to quote Ellul once more, turns on “the principle of confrontation”—not prescription of formulaic solutions. He asserts:

The only thing that will be of any use...is not synthesis or adaptation, but confrontation; that is, bringing face to face two factors that are contradictory and irreconcilable and at the same time inseparable. For it is only out of the decision [one] makes when [one] experiences this contradiction—never out of adherence to an integrated system—that [one] will arrive at a practical position.

(quoted in Clark, 1981, p. 270)

In the intercultural encounter, I believe, is a genuine place for that elusive transformative “synthesis” that Ellul talks about in his mode of analysis, but the reason it happens so seldom in practice, in my view, is that there is so much concentration, through the way we theorize the encounter with the “other,” on resolving, domesticating, or taming those elements that seem to us “dangerous,” “risky,” and “threatening.” I do not believe that “knowledge production,” whether of the self or of the “other,” is supposed to serve that purpose primarily. All I know is that at the end of the day what gratifies me the most is transformation, worked out in that difficult process of engagement of difference that resolves itself not in the comfort or security of having finally attained so-called “functional adaptation” or “competence” but rather personal growth. I hope it is that which this framework, this theory of challenge, brings as contribution to a new way of theorizing intercultural communication.

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