

Constructivist Approach to Intercultural Communication

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In his seminal book, *Silent Language* (1959), the anthropologist Edward T. Hall coined the term “intercultural communication” and defined the initial conditions for understanding how people can communicate across cultural boundaries. This work was motivated by the task he and his linguist colleague George Trager faced at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) in the early 1950’s, which was to prepare international development workers and business people to be more effective in cross-cultural situations. Participants were looking for practical ways to communicate better in the various cultural contexts in which they would be temporarily operating. They balked at the idea that they should themselves become anthropologists (e.g. mastering the ethnographic intricacies of another culture) or linguists (e.g. becoming fluent in the syntactic and semantic dimensions of another language). In response, Hall and Trager threw out those traditional methods and constructed a new method of dealing with cultural difference specifically for the purpose of supporting intercultural communication.

Hall and Trager were working in a time of paradigmatic change. The old school of diplomacy had depended on an international group of cosmopolites, but that system was mostly destroyed in the political ferment and violence of the first half of the 20th century. Simultaneously, the idea of cultural relativity first proposed by Franc Boas at the beginning of that century was catching on, albeit not always in ways that he and some other anthropologists had intended. The original idea of cultural relativity was intended to counter the notion of a hierarchy of civilization, where the more “civilized” groups were justified in exploiting the barbarians and savages lower on the hierarchy. In the process of defining cultural worldviews as incomparable to outside standards, the relativists also (probably unintentionally) created a communication barrier. According to pure cultural relativism, people could not understand another worldview unless they were living in it – either through primary socialization or through later, long-term acculturation. So, theoretically, one could not communicate in another cultural context until one had mastered the ethnography and language of that group. Since this was an unrealistic demand on diplomats and others struggling to manage international crises, a kind of cultural shorthand was created during World War II by which cultural groups were treated as if they had different personalities. This had the effect of supporting existing stereotypes and creating new ones. Germans

were labeled as “aggressive” (and later, “organized”), Japanese were “devious” (and later, “hard-working”), and other groups were stereotyped in ways that continue to plague intercultural relations.

Hall avoided both the paralysis of pure cultural relativism and the simplification of cultural stereotyping with his method of *etic observational categories*. The method involved constructing perceptual categories that generated cultural “differences that made a difference” to communication. A well-known example is the distinction of *high-context communication* (a relatively high reliance on implicit contextual factors to complete the meaning of an utterance) and *low-context communication* (a lower reliance on context and more emphasis on explicit articulation to generate meaning). Hall did not claim that cultures or people were themselves high or low context, but rather that this was an important distinction to make for the purpose of understanding what people mean and for generating meaningful utterances in different cultural contexts. Hall shifted focus from the assumed “qualities” of a cultural group to the way in which people in the group actively coordinated meaning among themselves. By training the FSI participants to construct these kinds of observational categories, Hall equipped them to enter a wide variety of cultural contexts and to relatively quickly modify their interpretation and generation of communication behavior to become more appropriate in those contexts.

The idea that formulations of communication served a coordinating function in cultures was consistent with another development in the mid-twentieth century – linguistic relativism. As formulated in the well-known *Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis* (Whorf, 1956; Lakoff, 1987), linguistic relativism added a mechanism to the general idea of cultural relativism. It suggested that the formulation of different languages – their syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions – guided the experience of reality onto different paths. Like Hall and other pioneers of interculturalism such as Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn, Whorf used Native American cultures to exemplify his theory. He noted, for instance, that Native cultures that were more past-oriented (as indicated by a reliance on tradition, a focus on ancestors, and an emphasis on learning from past events) also had more elaborate past-tense syntax in their languages and a comparatively simple or even non-existent future tense. His point was not, as voiced by critics then and still today, that language determines thought. Rather, he argued that language represents an agreement among a group of people to organize their experience in particular ways (such as emphasizing past events), and that therefore the form of language was likely to correspond with the unique forms of experience in a particular cultural context.

As a linguist, George Trager was familiar with linguistic relativism, and Hall supports the idea in *The Silent Language*. The approach Trager and Hall took to intercultural training at FSI was consistent with the major implication of linguistic relativism – that learning how distinctions are made and maintained in another culture opens the door to experiencing the worldview of that culture. But rather than learning the complete language to enable that experience, Hall focused on calling attention to particular sets of distinctions that could guide meaning-making more accurately across cultures, even if people didn’t know the language. This is what Hall really meant by “the silent language.” It was not, as the Anchor edition book jacket blurb claimed, just about the way that people talk to each other without words. Rather, the silent language was the meaning-making function of culture itself – the pattern of distinctions that guide people’s collective experience in unique ways.

With the idea of etic observational categories, Hall was drawing on another paradigmatic shift that was beginning to occur in the middle of the 20th century – the emergence of *constructivism*. In general, constructivism refers to the perceptual processes that are associated with the construction of meaning. This was the original sense of the term as it was used by Piaget (1954) in *The Construction of Reality in the Child*, where he made the influential argument that human beings sequentially develop perceptual structures that allow them to adapt to their worlds in increasingly complex ways. Other constructivist development theory (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Perry, 1999) follows this lead by modeling how people learn to construe the world in particular ways that allow their experience to become more

“sophisticated” in perceptual, intellectual, ethical, and/or intercultural terms. Here is the position as stated by Kelly in his influential book, *Theory of Personal Constructs* (1963):

A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he (sic) fails to keep making something out of them, or if he waits until they have all occurred before he attempts to reconstrue them, he gains little in the way of experience from having been around when they happened (p.73).

The implication for intercultural communication is that intercultural experience does not occur automatically from being in the vicinity of cross-cultural events. People must be prepared to make something of the events—ideally, to attribute to events the meaning typical in the other culture. Further, people can become aware of their own worldviews, and in so doing they may attain the capability to “reconstrue” the world in culturally different ways; that is, in ways that contribute to intercultural communication. This is the essence of frame-of-reference shifting, or perspective-taking. The process whereby people develop this perceptual sophistication about cultural difference is the focus of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Communication (DMIS) (cross-reference, this volume).

In terms of scientific paradigms, constructivism is associated with the epistemology of quantum mechanics, particularly the Copenhagen school of interpretation associated with Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. A primary assumption of that school is that observers cannot be separated from their observations – that what people see is always a function of how they are looking. This is exactly what Hall argued in *Silent Language* – that people’s experience is not universal, but rather guided by the patterns of distinctions constituting their worldviews. Beyond this basically relativist assumption is a more profound implication of constructivism for intercultural communication. If observers are necessarily involved in observations, then how they choose to observe other cultures will be intrinsic to their experience of them. In other words, events will more or less conform to the expectation people bring to them. If, for instance, people choose *dominant-culture power* as an observational category, then their experience of cross-cultural interaction will necessarily be in terms of power. In a constructivist view, this is more than just a case of selective perception – the events these people experience will in fact be permeated with power relations, because that is how we they are construing events. The implication of this self-fulfilling prophecy is at the root of Hall’s idea of constructed etic categories – if people want to engage in intercultural communication, they need to construct observational categories that highlight communication. Further, if people want to modify their communication to more closely match that of a different culture, they need to generate categories that allow them to experience the world more like the other people who have that worldview.

Hall’s constructivist ideas stand in contrast to many other systems of describing cultural differences that are based on a more positivist epistemology. Positivism is associated with Auguste Comte, who brought the ideas of linear causality and predictability from the Newtonian physics paradigm into social science. He thought that people could be observed objectively (meaning that the observer is a “neutral” collector of data associated with real objects in the environment) and, with sufficient data, people’s behavior could be predicted and controlled. The implication of this epistemology for intercultural communication is that more “objective” knowledge about another cultures will allow people to predict behavior in that culture better, thus allowing them to control events there more effectively. This view is fuels the desire of some participants in intercultural training programs for intercultural recipes or lists of cultural do’s and don’ts. A more abstract form of intercultural positivism is the search for “universal values.” Assessing cultures in terms of set of principles such as human rights or religiosity easily yields something like the hierarchy of civilization mentioned earlier. The reification of cultural qualities (orientations, dimensions, etc.) also depends on positivist epistemology, since the qualities are usually assumed to exist independently of the observational strategy being used. In sum,

positivist approaches to intercultural communication are still very common, despite the evidence that the field was founded with a constructivist approach.

Implications of a Constructivist Approach for Developing Intercultural Communication Competence

The term “competence” is frequently defined in terms that include some combination of knowledge (e.g. ethnography), attitudes (e.g. motivation), skills (e.g. role-taking), or personal traits (e.g. “open-mindedness”). From a constructivist perspective, competence is not any of those things, but something more like a “condition.” For instance, a person who is competent in riding a bicycle does not necessarily know anything about the operation of the bike, does not necessarily like riding the bike, may have no particular skill in bike-riding such as racing or acrobatics, and certainly has no particular set of personal characteristics. What the person has is the ability to maintain a condition (of balance) suitable for using that kind of conveyance. The condition is not inherent, as any person who has learned to ride a bike knows, but once it is learned it is relatively permanent and transferable to other conveyances that demand balance.

Applying this constructivist idea to intercultural communication competence, it is also the case that communicating well in another culture is not a function of knowledge, attitude, skills, or traits. Rather, it is the ability to establish a particular perceptual condition that enables communication competence to be exercised. People establish the condition for communication naturally in their own cultures. According to current neuroscience, the precursor condition for any action is what Damasio (1999) calls “the feeling of what happens.” This is an embodied process, whereby the passive feeling of a bodily condition is given active form in a particular emotion, thought, or other action (M. Bennett & Castiglioni, 2004). In their own cultures, people automatically feel the conditions for communication – the social context, the physical orientation of bodies, the extent of eye contact, and most importantly, the expectation that communication will occur. In familiar cultural contexts, the condition for communication is both clear and nuanced. Clear, because the feeling is undeniably one of communication, and not, for instance, hunger. Nuanced, because people both generate and respond to extremely slight variations in conditions in order to modify the length, intensity, and content of the communication.

The underlying question of intercultural communication competence is how to get a clear and nuanced feeling for communication in a different, unfamiliar culture. One answer is to live in that culture sufficiently long and intensely to become bi-cultural. Then, as implied by neuroscientific research on bilingual kids, the feeling of each context is different but occurs equally automatically. Another answer is more suitable for short-term sojourners such as exchange students, business travelers, and development workers and for people moving in and out of domestic multicultural work and social situations. It is *perceptual flexibility*. There are two aspects to perceptual flexibility: 1) *perceptual acuity*, being conscious of one’s own perceptual processes; and 2) *perceptual agility*, being able to change one’s own perceptual process to become more like that of a target culture. The first aspect, perceptual acuity, is essentially “cultural self-awareness” – a well-developed sense of how one’s perception is being guided by cultural context. Cultural self-awareness is a prerequisite for perceptual agility, since to intentionally change one’s perceptual organization of the world demands a clear sense of the starting point.

With perceptual agility, it is possible to engage in intentional empathy. The best-known aspect of empathy is perspective-taking, where one attempts to construe the world more like someone in the target culture. For instance, a man might try to construe some event more as a woman would, or a member of a liberal political group might try to interpret events in a more conservative way. By taking perspective, one sets up the conditions for *empathy*, or experiencing the world *as if* one were someone else. It is from this *as if* position that one can get the “feeling of what happens” in the other culture, which then allows

communication to flow naturally in a different way. Using the previous examples, from this empathic position a man might naturally be able to use compliments more in the way women typically use them, or a US American liberal might be able to find something laudatory about Ronald Reagan.

The less obvious aspect of empathy is *intentionality*. Part of intentionality is “mindfulness.” One can (and should) be mindful of one’s behavior in another culture, since no matter how attentive one is to different cultural expectations, it is likely that some automatic processes from one’s own culture will be engaged – possibly in ways that are detrimental to the goal of effective communication. Mindfulness provides a check on that behavior, allowing people to become passive observers of their own behavior in the new context. Beyond mindfulness is the more active process of *creating expectation*. People are largely unaware of how expectation is employed in their own cultures, since it is like the air they breathe. But in a constructivist view, every distinction people make, every thought they have, and every action they undertake is creating expectation. If people pay attention to one kind of thing and not another, they are creating an expectation (prophecy) of the greater existence of the thing they are attending to. If people think “this is crazy,” they are creating the expectation that something will not make sense, and so forth. Humans are social creatures, so their expectations never exist purely in an individual context – expectations are formed through socialization and they need to be coordinated with those of others to enable survival in groups. This is the essence of “constructionism,” the social application of constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In communication, it is the coordination of expectation that allows intentions to be more or less matched with interpretations.

Intercultural empathy is how people can consciously generate expectation in a way that is more like how another group does it than how it is done in their own groups. The generated expectation creates a different experience – one that is more closely matched to the target culture. This is the essence of what George Kelly meant when he said that our experience was a function of how we construe events. And this is also the essence of what E.T. Hall means by the “silent language.” The goal is not just to interpret events differently, but also to experience events differently, and further to do so intentionally.

Implications of a Constructive Approach for Intercultural Ethicality

Ethicality is a difficult topic for interculturalists. Most ethical systems are based on universal principles – e.g. religious systems, secular human rights, or other forms of universal values. Yet cultural relativism was built on a disavowal of universalism, specifically for the ethical purpose of counteracting colonialism and other forms of exploitation that were based on the universal concept of “civilization.” In its purest form, cultural relativism does not allow any culture to be judged by standards created outside that culture’s worldview. Pure relativism works as long as cultures do not interact with one another or people do not need to operate in multiple cultures. But of course such cross-cultural contact is exactly the case in reality. Once contact occurs, the need arises to choose one behavior or another in the cross-cultural context – to make ethical decisions.

One approach to making cross-cultural ethical decisions is “when in Rome, do as the Romans.” But it is easy to see that short-term visitors to another culture are ill-advised to adopt wholesale the various sexual mores, relational obligations, or religious prescriptions that might be judged “good” in various cultural contexts. Another relativist approach is “it’s not bad or good, it’s just different.” That may be an adequate way to avoid unnecessary outside judgments about other cultures, but it is inadequate to the needs of deciding what to do inside other cultures where actions (including no action) have consequences.

The temptation for people seeking ethical guidance in cross-cultural encounters is to return to the universality that cultural relativism rejected. Usually this is done with the rationale that only “good” universal principles will be applied (e.g. human rights). But of course someone is deciding what is “good.” By the standards of pure relativism, any application of universal ethics in the name of absolute

truth is imperialistic. And that is the conundrum for interculturalists: if they subscribe to a universal ethical system, they are in effect rejecting cultural relativism and accepting some form of the hierarchy of civilization. If they try to avoid ethical judgments altogether, they are dooming any effort they might make to communicate effectively in a different cultural context, since all communication is fraught with ethical decisions about good or bad ways to proceed.

A constructivist approach offers a third possibility for dealing with ethical issues in intercultural communication. An example of this approach to ethicality is William Perry's (1999) model of cognitive and ethical development, which is based on principles of perceptual complexity similar to those underlying DMIS and Piaget or Vgotsky. Perry suggests three major phases of development, divided into nine specific stages. The first phase in *the search for truth*, which is divided into *dualism* and *multiplicity*. Dualism is the default condition; children (at least in Western cultures, but arguably more universally) are socialized to experience a world in which events exist or not, in which things are true or false, and where there are identifiable good guys and bad guys. Authorities – parents, teachers, religious or political leaders – have the answers, and it is the child's duty to acquire truth from them. Perry argues that in many cases people do not progress beyond this stage. In intercultural terms, this ethical position is associated with the high levels of ethnocentrism.

Education systems in many societies are geared to expose students to differing opinions among authorities, and the result of that exposure may be a movement to multiplicity. In multiplicity, people recognize that authorities disagree about the truth, but they believe that truth nevertheless exists at a deeper level. One manifestation of multiplicity is an exaggerated tolerance for ambiguity: "everyone has an opinion – who's knows what the real truth is – whatever." This position may be associated with the naïve cultural relativism of "it's not bad or good, it's just different." Another manifestation of multiplicity is the search for hidden truth. In that search, people may join cults or extreme religious groups that claim to have a truth that has been ignored or suppressed. In intercultural terms, such groups usually generate ethnocentric superiority, which in turn may justify people imposing the discovered truth on others.

Lee Knefelkamp, an adult education scholar and the primary interpreter of William Perry's work in contemporary contexts, has in her introduction to the republication of his work named the next phase, *contextual relativism*. In this phase, one attains the ability to empathize with alternative ethical positions – one can intentionally imagine how goodness and badness is experienced differently in different contexts. So, for instance, a foe of abortion can experience the goodness of a woman's freedom to choose, or a proponent of capital punishment can experience the badness of sanctioned institutional murder. The enactment of these empathic shifts does not constitute agreement with the imagined ethical positions, any more than a therapist empathizing with disturbed clients is agreeing with their worldviews. In intercultural terms, contextual relativism is a necessary part of intercultural communication competence. People need to construe events in ways associated with another culture, and an important part of every culture is how people assign goodness and badness to various events.

The ability to take a conflicting ethical perspective is the key to making constructivist ethical choices – what Perry terms *commitment in relativism*. This third phase is divided into six stages that move progressively toward the ability to make conscious ethical choices in the face of viable alternatives. In many ways, this is the crux of a constructivist approach to intercultural communication. Cultures for the most part represent viable, alternative ways of being in the world. The world needs this diversity. But the world also needs human beings to unify themselves sufficiently to sustain their planet and its inhabitants. Intercultural communication is a crucial competence for coordinating this unity and diversity, and a constructivist approach allows us to engage that effort with consciousness and intentionality.

Cross-References

Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity; Cross-Cultural Communication Theory and Research, Overview; Cross-Cultural Competence; Cultural Communication, Overview; Culture-Specific and Culture-General Training; Dialectics of Culture and Communication; Intercultural Competence Development; Intercultural Empathy; Intercultural Ethics

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