

PARADIGMATIC ASSUMPTIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

English Version by Milton J. Bennett

Italian Version by Ida Castiglioni

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Intercultural relations is an unusual academic specialty among the social sciences. This is in part because it specifies a relatively specific domain as its focus. So, unlike sociology, which claims all of social relations as its domain, or anthropology, which even more grandly claims all of human phenomena as its bailiwick, intercultural studies constrains itself to those human interactions that occur across cultural boundaries. But the more salient aspect of this field's uniqueness is its assumption that people can be aware of their cultural experience, and further, that they can intentionally shift their experience into different cultural contexts. This focus on consciousness and intentionality differentiates intercultural relations even from cross-cultural psychology, which, while it studies comparative and some interactive phenomena across cultures, does not do so with the same assumption of self-reflexive consciousness.

The purpose of this article is to show that the field of intercultural relations is largely built out of a constructivist paradigm, and that other disciplines that study cross-cultural phenomena generally do so from other paradigmatic bases. This short exposition will also consider how "paradigmatic confusion" occurs when incompatible epistemological assumptions are inadvertently mixed in explanations and practice. This last phenomenon is particularly troublesome for intercultural relations, because the field relies on "theory into practice" as its criterion for conceptual relevance. If the paradigm underlying a practice is different than the explanation attached to the practice, both the credibility of the concept and the effectiveness of the method suffer.

The Positivist (Newtonian) Paradigm

Auguste Comte (b.1798-d.1857) formalized the idea of “positivism” as an epistemological position. Building on and limiting ideas from Aristotle and incorporating some of then-heretical thinking of Francis Bacon (b.1561-d.1626) and the formalization of empiricism accomplished by Sir Isaac Newton (b.1642-d.1727), Comte (1966) held that all metaphysical speculation is invalid and the only appropriate objects and criteria of human knowledge are data from sense experience. While Newton focused his attention on the physical world, Comte extended the idea of axiomatic scientific thinking to the study of all phenomena, including social relations. As such, he is often considered to be the father of sociology.

Newton is best-known for his formulation of the universe as a great clock, whose movements would be absolutely predictable given sufficient knowledge of the mechanism. All traditional science, including social science, follows this model of linear causality. In the physical world, energy acts upon matter, causing a predictable physical effect. In the social world, forces associated with social (or psychic) events impinge on groups and individuals so as to cause social effects to occur. Just as the physical world can be manipulated by agents who apply energy in particular ways, so by extension the social world can be manipulated by agents who generate particular social forces. By studying the correlations of cause and effect, one can exercise control of certain causes so as to generate predictable effects. Thus, sociology focuses on the correlation of social variables with social outcomes, with an eye to enabling agents to more predictably control social processes, as Comte argued they should. Of particular note for intercultural relations is the teleological implication of positivism. Despite its insistence on only describing empirical phenomena, positivism implies that there is an underlying “ideal” reality which is being (imperfectly) described. In the physical world, this ideal state is traditionally that of equilibrium. Thus, when the Nobel prize-winner Ilya Prigogine described complex, self-organizing living systems as a “far from equilibrium systems” (1971), he was departing sharply from this traditional scientific view.

By metaphorical extension, the ideal social world was one in which a “natural” hierarchical order prevailed. Social control could then be defined as removing obstacles to the fulfillment of this natural state, an activity pursued by Marx and Hitler, among others. Through social Darwinism, the assumed inherent hierarchical nature of social reality justified colonialism, excused slavery, and generally supported the ethnocentric parochialism of those who defined both the system and their own superiority within it.

Implications for Intercultural Theory

There are three rather dismal implications of positivism for the idea of “culture” itself. One is that culture is the kind of metaphysical speculation that is precluded from study. We can only describe behavior, but we cannot speculate on the patterns of such behavior that might be shared by groups of interacting individuals. Patterns do not exist outside of our observation, and therefore they are simply epiphenomenal to our observation of the behavior itself.

This radical form of positivism is sometimes employed by extreme post-structuralists who assert that all behavior must be understood in terms of the particular context in which it occurs. While mainstream post-structuralism employs the idea of cultural context heavily, the extreme form rejects the relatively broad context of culture as too nomothetic to enable an ideographic understanding of the particular situation. Frequently this understanding is one that focuses exclusively on who is oppressing whom in the situation. This view defines culture mostly in terms of privilege and institutional dominance, and so tends to miss the idea of subjective culture that is commonly used in intercultural relations (Bennett, 1998)

The second dismal theoretical implication of positivism is the polar opposite of the first. When “culture” is described in positivist ways, it is reified or essentialized. In the classic constructivist sociology text, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1967) put it this way:

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly supra-human terms... Reification implies that men (*human beings*) are capable of forgetting their own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness... Man, the producer of a world, is apprehended as its product, and human activity as an epiphenomenon of non-human processes... That is, man is capable paradoxically of producing a reality that denies him (p 89).

This kind of reification is the natural concomitant of a positivist epistemology. Positivism carries the assumption that things exist aside from their description – that there is an objective world that exists independently from our observation of it. As we will see, in the physical sciences the simple assumption of absolute reality has long been superseded by Einsteinian relativity at the cosmological level of analysis and by quantum uncertainty at the subatomic level. However, much of social science continues to emulate the positivism of traditional science in assuming that social phenomena can be discovered and classified in definite and enduring ways.

Like other social sciences, intercultural relations too often falls into naïve reifications of “culture” that emerge from our unconscious acceptance of a positivist epistemology. For instance, the popular iceberg metaphor presents “explicit culture” as visible above the waterline, while “implicit culture” lurks dangerously out of view underwater (Ting Toomey, ??). The implication of the metaphor is that culture is a thing that must be known to be successfully circumnavigated. Does this idea of culture lead us a sophisticated praxis of intercultural adaptation? Or does it more likely fuel the efforts of some entrepreneurs to produce ever more ornate descriptions of implicit culture?

The third dismal implication of positivism for intercultural theory is epitomized by much of the field of cross-cultural psychology. Typically, studies in this field focus on how cultural context does or does not affect the manifestation of certain psychological variables, with the goal of finding those variables that are the most “universal” – that is, the variables that are least affected by culture. These studies are positivist at two levels. In their methodology they reify culture, and in their goals they reify psychological processes. By making culture an independent variable, researchers must specify the parameters of the “cultural context” in which the dependent variable will be measured. In doing so, they treat descriptions such as self-reports of “cultural values” or “cultural identification” as indicative of a reality existing outside of the reporter’s consciousness. Second (and paradoxically), these studies often have the goal discovering universal psychological processes that are unaffected by cultural context. So, having reified culture to create the independent variable, they try to show that the dependent variable (a psychological process such as “tolerance of ambiguity”) is not, in fact, dependent on cultural context. In other words, after reifying their construction of cultural context, they reify their construction of universal psychological processes. In the process of performing these methodological rituals, cross-cultural psychologists frequently fall into their own labyrinth of fragmentation. In the end, they have described pieces of internal and external reality, but they have failed to create any meaning for intercultural relations.

Of course, not all cross-cultural psychologists are absolutistic reductionists. For instance, John Berry (2002) argues that studies should look for both similarities and differences across cultures, and

that basic psychological processes are likely to manifest differently in different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, he also steps into the reification of psychological processes, as perhaps he must as a practitioner of this essentially positivist discipline:

A working assumption of this chapter is that such “universal laws” of human behavior can be approached even though they may not be fully reached. That is, I believe that we may eventually discover the underlying psychological processes that are characteristic of the species, *homo sapiens*, as a whole (Berry, 2004, p. 167).

Berry’s statement of psychological universalism should not be surprising to anyone familiar with traditional social science. While it is not “absolutist,” it nevertheless is positivist in the sense it assumes, as do all Newtonian scientists, that a reality exists independent of our description of it. With this assumption, Berry and other cross-cultural psychologists will inevitably chase the holy grail of lawful prediction of human behavior, only to accept in the end that they were “close” to capturing it.

Implications for Practice

Since positivism specializes in description, it implies for the practice of intercultural relations that descriptive knowledge alone is sufficient for success in intercultural encounters. This is the basis of the many “area studies” orientation programs and websites that purport to teach people how to get along in other cultures by giving them information about the institutions, customs, and mores of the “target” culture. Sometimes this information is even about subjective culture, such as information about nonverbal behavior, communication style, or cultural values. While such information may be a useful concomitant of intercultural competence, it does not in itself constitute competence. One must know what to do with the information to make it useful. For instance, a medical doctor who has all the latest information about cancer is not necessarily able to perform a successful cancer surgery. In every other arena, we are used to the idea that knowledge is only useful in a more general context of competence. Perhaps it is a special characteristic of ethnocentrism that people often cannot imagine that crossing cultures might demand competence, and so they think information will suffice.

Perhaps in an attempt to augment simple information, many practitioners add a behavioral dimension in the form of lists of “dos and don’ts” in the target culture. That lists of behaviors that one must or must not enact in a particular culture would be useful in intercultural relations is a definitely positivist idea. The assumption that one could acquire a set of behaviors through learning emerges from

the behaviorist learning theories that frequently underlie training programs. Not only is this approach promulgated by naïve trainers; it is frequently strongly requested by the clients of those trainers.

A fine example of a behaviorist learning technique commonly used in intercultural training is that of the “cultural assimilator” (Albert, 1995; Brislin et al 1986; Triandis, 1995). Respondents are presented with a short description of an incident demanding some interpretation or action, and then they are given several choices of response. Some of the responses are ethnocentric, in the sense that they project the respondent’s own (assumed) culture into the event. Some are stereotypical, and one response is “best.” In other words, respondents are reinforced for recognizing the correct response, similar to a multiple-choice exam. The cultural assimilator has been shown to be an effective tool for teaching about culture, and some correlation between performance on an assimilator and certain aspects of cultural adjustment have been shown (Cushner, 1989).

Not surprisingly, the cultural assimilator is popular mainly with cross-cultural psychologists and has been less accepted by communication-based interculturalists. While the interculturalists might not be able to conceptualize it this way, perhaps they are reacting to the paradigmatic confusion represented by the technique. The claim made for the assimilator is that it trains people to be more adaptive to cultural differences. This goal emerges from either a systems paradigm, with its assumption of interaction within systems, or from a constructivist paradigm, with its assumption of constructing alternative experiences. There is nothing in a positivist paradigm to suggest the possibility of cultural adaptation. While there is a behaviorist learning theory that translates into the practice of stimulus/response learning sets (such as found in the cultural assimilator), that theory does not suggest that people can become accomplished at intentionally adapting their behavior. At best, the techniques that derive from a positivist paradigm allow for learning to assimilate to a new culture. More likely, the techniques are simply adequate for learning about cultures without any necessary relationship to how one adapts to a different culture.

The Relativist (Einsteinian) Paradigm

Einstein’s assumption of relativity overturned the Cartesian/Newtonian notion of an objective observer. In Einstein’s view, any observation is necessarily restricted by our “frame of reference” – specifically, to how we are moving relative to the rest of the universe. All understanding must occur relative to the context of both the observer and the observed. In the social sciences, this idea is most often expressed through systems theory (Watzlawick et al, 1967), where meaning is defined in the mutual interaction of elements within systems. For instance, to take Watzlawick’s well-known example, one cannot determine absolutely whether a husband drinks because his wife nags or his wife nags

because his wife drinks; all we can say is that each defines the other as the cause of the behavior. They are, in a profound way, defining each other through their interaction.

In the humanistic application of relativism, postmodernists of the Frankfurt (e.g. Theodor Adorno) and French (e.g. Jean-François Lyotard) schools reject the assumption of objectivity, replacing it with a very Einsteinian assumption of relativity. In its post-structural social form, the assumption of relativity has acquired its own load of reification. One's frame of reference is often taken as a kind of perceptual prison from which there is no experiential escape. After an acknowledgement of our differing worldviews, there is nothing much more to be done, except perhaps to decry the efforts of the more powerful to impose their worldview on the less powerful. The tyranny of absolutism is exchanged for the rigidity of relativism.

The anthropologists Boas and Herskovits earlier stumbled on this same tradeoff. In defining culture in relativistic terms, they attempted to counter the absolutist notions of social Darwinianism – the idea that culture is the evolution of civilization. But in so doing, they eliminated any way of comparing and contrasting cultures and implied that the only way to know another culture was to become assimilated or re-socialized into it. This assumption continues to hold sway among some interculturalists in their approach to immigration issues, where the emphasis in training is on one-way “adjustment” to the new culture. Of course, this simple approach fails to address the two-way adaptation that is demanded from everyone living in increasingly multicultural societies. Perhaps our failure to enact this more complex solution is that a too-simple definition of culture precludes it.

Implications for Intercultural Theory

The relativist paradigm lies at the heart of mainstream communication. Theories of human communication, including those of intercultural communication, are based heavily on systems theory. Systems based research, rather than searching for the universal law with which to predict human behavior, tries to describe how roles and rules interact in complex systems. Communication research in particular seeks to understand how people are influenced by context to create the meanings they do. So it was natural that culture was defined as a system, and the meanings created by people within the system were classified as “cultural elements.” These categories of elements are the typical constituents of intercultural courses, such as language use, nonverbal behavior, communication style, cognitive style, and cultural values. Intercultural theory in this paradigm describes how people who are influenced by one set of elements attempt to understand and be understood by people who are influenced by a different set of elements (Cf. Hall, 1959; Stewart and Bennett, 1993).

Unlike the universalist aspirations of cross-cultural psychology, intercultural communication simply describes the discontinuities of meaning that occur when particular different sets of cultural elements collide. Interculturalists are less likely to seek underlying variables to correlate with outcomes, and more likely to seek systemic explanations of how particular meaning is created in or across cultural context. Like all of relativism, this approach has the strength of maintaining relevance to the particular context under consideration and it avoids the “etic error” of over-generalizing nomothetic data. On the other hand, a relativistic approach may make the “emic error” of being so particular to context, of being so “thick” (Geertz, 1973), that no generalization at all can be made.

The major limitation for intercultural theory of the relativistic paradigm is the lack of any assumption of “crossing context.” Einstein did not conceive of observers suddenly jumping from their moving frame into a different frame, perhaps to now look back at their previous frame moving at a different speed. Similarly, systems theory does not support the idea of observers switching systems. At best, system switching is only theoretically possible with the kind of re-enculturation or assimilation that would also be allowed by a positivist notion of culture.

In the extreme forms of contextualism represented by some post-structuralists, any claim of operating out of one’s system is thought to be bogus, it being simply a denial of the inevitable limitation that a system places upon its elements. This claim is made most strongly when the context is one of privilege and power. In this view, not only does one naturally desire to remain in the context of power, but any attempt to understand phenomena outside that context is inevitably tainted by the perspective of power.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners of intercultural relations tend to use the relativist paradigm quite naturally. They are wont to give imprecations such as, “It’s not bad or good, it’s just different,” with the implication that no judgment of phenomena is possible from outside the context. Of course, this is a good protection from the ravages of positivism-based colonialism, but it has its own limitations of being at least simplistic, if not solipsistic.

More sophisticated practitioners of this paradigm use the idea of “perspective” quite well, frequently using the metaphor of “colored glasses” to express the idea that culture colors perspective. For many people, the idea that their culture colors their perspective of others and the world in general is profound news, and in fact it is such a departure from positivist thought that people may experience the idea as transformative. Certainly, from an intercultural point of view, having more people in the world who are aware of perspective is a good thing. Training exercises such as Description, Interpretation, and

Evaluation (Bennett, 1988) are used frequently to bring people's attention to the existence of perspective. Practitioners also use movies such as *Rashoman* to illustrate the point.

However, the idea of perspective is rife with possibilities for paradigmatic confusion. One such confusion is the idea that one could "put one's glasses aside," thus assumedly revealing the true world that underlies the various distortions of culture. This harkens back to Berry's (2002) idea that there are universal truths that are manifested differently in different cultural contexts. This is, of course, a positivist notion with a relativistic overlay, and it betrays a confusion of paradigms and creating an inherent incoherence.

Another paradigmatic confusion is assuming that an awareness of perspective translates into an ability to shift perspective. Not only is this generally untrue, but it is theoretically not possible within the relativistic paradigm. So trainers and educators who use and teach about culturally relative perspective cannot coherently get from that idea directly to the idea of frame-shifting, the crux of intercultural adaptation. When they try, it tends to elicit the "huh?" reaction typical of an encounter with paradigmatic confusion. There is nothing wrong with teaching the idea of perspective, but the approach needs to be augmented with some constructivist thinking before it can become sufficiently self-reflexive to allow the actual transformation of context, and thus perspective.

The Constructivist (Quantum) Paradigm

Paradoxically but necessarily, the very idea of "paradigm" exists in a paradigm. Thomas Kuhn (1967) showed that the observer, the observer's theory, and the research apparatus itself were all essentially expressions of a perspective; and therefore, the results of all experiments conducted with this perspective were also expression of the same perspective. In other words, our perspective *constructs* the reality which we describe. This is a quite different notion than relativistic perspective, which simply describes different views of reality. In this paradigm, the observer interacts with reality via his or her perspective in such a way that reality is organized according to the perspective.

This interaction of observer and observed has been demonstrated most dramatically by the quantum physicists. For instance, Werner Heisenberg famously observed in his "uncertainty principle" that it is impossible to separate the properties of objects from the measurement of them, nor from the measurer who wields the measurement apparatus (Briggs & Peat, 1984). In this view, reality takes on the quality of a self-fulfilling prophecy, where our perspective is the prophecy and the necessary interaction of our perspective with all that we observe is the mechanism of fulfillment of the prophecy.

The application of the quantum scientific paradigm to social science has yielded the approach of *constructivism*. The term "constructionism," while similar in sound, actually refers to something closer

to relativistic post-structuralism, particularly with regard to text. The idea of constructivism is more closely linked with the quantum idea of “organization of reality through observer/observation/observed interaction.” The recent lineage of this notion traces back to George Kelly’s theory of personal constructs, Piaget’s work in psychology, Berger and Luckmann in sociology, Gregory Bateson in anthropology, the Palo Alto school of psychology (Paul Watzlawick), Heinz Von Foerster in neurophysiology, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in linguistics, and most recently and completely is expressed by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Here is an early version by George Kelly (1963):

A person can be a witness to a tremendous parade of episodes and yet, if he 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).

This quote contains many of the core concepts of constructivism. By using the term “episodes,” Kelly implies that there is no inherent meaning in the phenomena themselves. People have to “make something out of them,” that is, they need to (and necessarily must) interact with the episodes for them to become meaningful events. Also, Kelly suggests that “experience” occurs not only in context, as do the relativists, but that it may not occur at all without engagement of the phenomena. This is a profoundly non-positivist notion, and one that will affect intercultural work dramatically.

Implications for Intercultural Theory

The constructivist paradigm avoids the reification of culture, either in its objective sense of institutions, or in its subjective sense of worldview. In this view, “culture” is simply our description of patterns of behavior generated through human interaction within some boundary condition. For instance, “Japanese culture” is a description of patterns of interaction among people (and their products, such as institutions) within the boundary condition of a geographical nation-state grouping. Or “Kurdish culture” is a description of interaction within the boundary condition of a geo-political ethnic grouping. When people both describe a culture and consider themselves as participating in it, the term “culture” may also refer to an identity.

Following this definition of culture, people do not “have” a worldview – rather, they are constantly in the process of interacting with the world in ways that both express the pattern of the history of their interactions and that contribute to those patterns. So, if one wishes to participate in Japanese culture as an Italian, she must stop organizing the world in an Italian way and start organizing it in a

Japanese way. (This is the theoretical ideal, never achieved, of course). Where does she “go” conceptually to achieve this shift? To inter-culture space, which is constituted of culture-general constructs (constructed etic categories) that allow cultural contrasts to be made. From this meta-level space, she can “enter” the organizing pattern of a culturally-different other by first shifting to the contrasting etic constructs and then to the appropriate emic constructs.

The ability to use self-reflexive consciousness in such a way as to construct alternative cultures and move into alternative experience is the crux of intercultural adaptation. When two people are doing this, it generates a “third culture space” – which is similar to the constructed inter-culture mentioned above. Leadership in a multicultural group may well occur in this space. But the leader needs to be able to move from this space into and out of the specific cultural experiences represented in the group. Otherwise, competent intercultural leadership is not distinguishable from simply imposing a corporate culture on everyone.

Notable among the constructivists are Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1992). Their brand of constructivism is particularly appropriate for understanding the idea of culture:

Those behavioral patterns which have been acquired ontogenically in the communicative dynamics of a social environment and which have been stable through generations, we shall call “cultural behaviors” (p.162).

Cultural behaviors, then, are simply the ongoing manifestations of an organization of reality maintained by the interaction within a social environment. This definition of culture avoids the reification of positivism and the contextualism of relativism. Maturana (1988) extends Kelly’s idea of experience into this realm:

The praxis of living, the experience of the observer as such, just happens....Because of this, explanations are essentially superfluous; we as observers do not need them to happen; but when it happens to us that we explain, it turns out that between language and bodyhood the praxis of living of the observer changes as he or she generates explanations of his or her praxis of living. This is why everything that we say or think has consequences in the way we live (p. 46).

Culture is a result of the lived experience (praxis) of participating in social action. Part of our experience is “linguaging,” including linguaging about our experience, which generates the “explanations” about

our lived experience that we can call “culture.” In other words, culture is a construction, but culture is not purely a cognitive invention. It is both the explanation and the essence of our lived social experience. Our cultural behavior is an “enactment” of our collective experience, and, through this enactment, becomes yet more experience. This is the essence of “cultural identity.”

Implications for Practice

For a praxis of intercultural relations, the minimum conceptual requirement is a self-reflexive definition of culture. There are two reasons for this. One is the obvious observation that how we define culture is itself a product of culture. One need look no further than the significant differences between American and German approaches to culture to see this, not to mention the larger differences between Western and Asian approaches. Any definition of culture needs to take into account that it is defining the human activity of defining. When we realize this, we can spend less time arguing over the “best” definition of culture and more time assessing any definition for its usefulness to our purposes.

The second reason for using a self-reflexive definition of culture relates directly to our purpose. When we ask people to become more interculturally competent, we are asking them to engage in a self-reflexive act. Specifically, we ask them to use the process of defining culture (which is their culture) to redefine culture in a way that is not their culture. Since our different experience is a function of how we organize reality differently, the only way people can have access to the experience of a different culture is by organizing reality more in that way than in their own way. Both positivists and relativists would say that this is impossible. A constructivist would just say it is difficult. But even the constructivist would say it is impossible if we are using a reified definition of culture. With a self-reflexive definition of culture, we can proceed to explore the nature of cultural experience in a paradigmatically coherent way. That is, we are not struggling with trying to join a positivist metaphor such as “culture as iceberg” with a constructivist outcome such as “reframing cultural experience.” Instead, we can aptly claim that the dynamic quality of cultural organization can be engaged by our equally dynamic individual consciousness.

The appropriate constructivist definition of culture and consciousness also enables the adaptation strategy of *intercultural empathy* (Bennett, 1993). Empathy is the process of imaginative participation in an alien experience. In the case of intercultural empathy, the alien experience is that which occurs in a different culture. To imaginatively participate in the experience of that culture, we must first attempt to organize the world in the “alien” way. Then, by allowing our experience to flow into the alternative organization, we acquire a facsimile of the experience. There are two caveats to intercultural empathy, however. One is that, short of being bicultural, we never completely stop organizing the world

according to our own culture. The other is that, short of being bicultural, we never completely apprehend the reality of a different culture. So our intercultural experience is necessarily a little general; we cannot help experiencing the cultural generalizations, since our access to the other cultural worldview has been constructed through generalizations. The more real people from another culture that we meet and empathize with, the more specific becomes our experience.

The final practical goal of intercultural relations is to overcome ethnocentrism and to enable successful communication in a multicultural environment. The constructivist paradigm allows us to see that ethnocentrism is simply the inability to experience reality differently than we were originally taught. This paradigm enables us to conceive different realities, to imagine how experience is different in those realities, and to apprehend to some degree that alien experience. This is the crux of communication – the ability to transcend our own limited experience and imagine the world as another is experiencing it.

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