

Constructivism, Intercultural

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Constructivism is an epistemological position commonly found in communication theory, cultural anthropology, developmental psychology, and learning theory. It holds that knowledge and experience of the world is constructed, not discovered. Constructivism is the primary perspective of intercultural communication, which seeks to coordinate meaning and action across cultures. The idea of constructivism is important to multicultural and intercultural contexts because it supports cultural adaptation, the practical alternative to assimilation. Without constructivist theory, it is difficult to imagine how cultural groups can co-exist other than segregating from each other or one assimilating to the other. Constructivism allows a third alternative, which is bi-cultural adaptation. The following paragraphs trace the paradigmatic roots of constructivism and show how it informs the intercultural adaptation strategy.

Paradigms

Paradigms are comprehensive sets of assumptions that guide scientific theory. While the concept of paradigms originated in the physical sciences, the idea is also useful in understanding changes in social science, including intercultural communication theory. The three major paradigms in physics are Newtonian, Einsteinian, and quantum. Their translations into social science (usually with a significant time lag) are termed positivist, relativist, and constructivist.

Like Newtonian physics, positivism assumes that there is a single absolute reality that can be described, predicted, and controlled by an objective observer. The idea of “culture” in a positivist paradigm is something like “civilization,” a position that lies at the top of a pyramid of human beings. Below civilized people are barbarians – people who have the potential to be civilized, but who need the help of colonization or nation building to join the upper ranks. Below barbarians are sub-human savages who can be exploited for their labor without concern for elevating them to higher levels. This idea drives a kind of “social Darwinism” that thrived in the 18th and 19th centuries has found new favor in some forms of libertarian capitalism. In this view, a few talented people who are more “fit” than others will appropriately rise to the top and enjoy the richest fruits of civilization, while less fit people populate the lower ranks and make do with more modest tastes of culture.

At around the turn of 19th to the 20th century, Albert Einstein introduced the idea of relativism into physics in a move that is now considered a paradigm shift. The absolute reality of Newton gave way to a relativistic universe where the position and perspective of the observer was intrinsic to how reality was apprehended. In social science, this view became the basis of systems theory, where events always needed to be understood in context. An important context for events was culture, and the notion of cultural relativity successfully challenged the pyramidal model of civilization. In the new paradigm’s view, cultures represented more or less autonomous worldviews that could not be evaluated according to a single absolute standard of civilization. Instead, each culture needed to be understood in its own context; Hopi Indian culture – its worldview and its products – represented just as much a sophisticated civilization as French culture or Chinese culture.

While (ideally) cultural relativism freed the myriad ways of being in the world from the hierarchical judgments of social Darwinism, colonialism, and imperialism, it also separated cultures from any single, objective base of meaning that could be used for communication. Cultural relativism does not suggest how people of different cultural contexts might understand one another, short of becoming re-socialized in the different cultural context. But global business, international education, and a host of other activities in multicultural societies and the global village depend on successful short-term communication among different cultural groups. This need for intercultural communication could only be addressed from a different paradigm.

The quantum paradigm in physics was established more or less concurrently with the Einsteinian paradigm, but it has come more slowly into social science as constructivism. While some concepts of constructivist epistemology certainly predated quantum physics, that paradigm articulated the idea that observers are intrinsically involved not only in the viewing of reality, but also in the construction of reality itself. In other words, observers cannot be separated from that which they observe – they co-evolve each other. This idea is key to how constructivism supported the development of intercultural communication.

Constructivism in Intercultural Communication

The idea of co-evolution was applied to understanding culture by the constructivist sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In their seminal text *The Social Construction of Reality* they defined the circular process whereby people are born into a society filled with institutions that focus their attention on certain constructions of reality, which are internalized through socialization to become the cultural worldview, which is in turn externalized through role behavior that supports the continuing existence of the institutions. Thus culture is constantly being re-created by people acting out their experience of the cultural institutions they were born into. Rather than being an absolute thing like civilization in the positivist paradigm, or even a relativist thing like a cultural system, culture in this constructivist view is not a thing at all. It is a process of being, and, when employed as a description, it is simply a way of observing human behavior.

In using the idea of constructed culture, intercultural communication is able to address several limitations of cultural positivism and relativism. Considering culture as a process of being avoids the essentialization and reification of culture that occurs in a positivist paradigm, positions that contribute to ethnocentrism and negative stereotyping. In this view, culture is not like a submerged iceberg waiting to smash into unsuspecting sojourners; it is simply the way groups of people habitually understand one another. We can learn those habits or not, but in either case we need not be threatened by the simple existence of alternative ways of being in the world.

The idea of culture as a process also avoids the romanticizing and exotifying of cultures that sometimes occurs in a relativist paradigm, positions associated with the simplification and positive stereotyping. By virtue of their existence, all ways of being are viable. We may prefer one way of being over than another, and we may even believe that a particular process is a better way for people to organize themselves. But the responsibility is with us, the observers, to be making such a judgment – superiority or inferiority does not exist in culture itself.

We are both the perceivers and the creators of cultural boundaries. This allows us to define and participate in multiple cultural groupings simultaneously, generating a *multi-layered cultural identity*. Thus, a person can simultaneously be a member of a national group such as U.S. American, an ethnic heritage group such as African American, a generational group such as millennial, and a sexual orientation group such as heterosexual. We may feel affiliated with those groups, or we may be ascribed membership in them by other observers, or we may both participate in and be observed to participate in the groups. Sorting through the complex layers of cultural identity is one of the tasks facing all of us in a multicultural society, and a constructivist definition of culture allows us to do so more intentionally.

Intercultural communication employs the idea of *constructed etic categories* to provide a means of comparing cultures without recourse to an objective standard like “civilization.” The term “etic” refers to the cross-cultural applicability of the categories. Typical etic categories are those of language use, nonverbal behavior, communication style, cognitive style, and cultural values. Each of these categories allows us perceive certain cultural differences, for example variations in greeting rituals, eye contact, verbal directness, abstractness, or individualism/collectivism. These differences lie in a constructivist paradigm, which means that they do not have an *a priori* existence in the cultures being described. For instance, people within a culture do not typically perceive themselves as engaging in greeting rituals; they are just communicating with one another. But by differentiating this particular behavior, an observer is able to contrast it to that of other cultures in a way that allows for possible misunderstanding to be identified and for possible adaptations to be considered. Note that people can be

observers of their own cultures, in which case it generates *cultural self-awareness*. (See Stereotypes/Generalizations and Intercultural Communication for a longer discussion of this process).

Finally, constructivism provides an authentic way to adapt to other cultures. In a positivist paradigm, there is only civilization, those that have it, and those that might get more of it through acculturation. In a relativist paradigm, there are only cultural contexts, and to change context demands that the old one be rejected as part of assimilating to the new one. But in a constructivist paradigm, it is possible to expand one's worldview to encompass both a primary socialization and one or more alternative ways of being of the world; that is, to develop a bi or multicultural identity. On the way to doing so, people attain various levels of expertise in perceiving cultural differences, generating alternative worldview elements, and experiencing the world in alternative ways. (See Intercultural Communication for a discussion of this developmental process).

A foundational idea in constructivism is that of "experience." Because reality is co-evolving with our perception of it, we do not have experience simply by being in the vicinity of events when they occur. Rather, our experience is a function of how we perceive (discriminate, construe) those events. In cross-cultural terms, this means that a U.S. American does not have a French experience simply by being in France; rather, he or she is likely having an American experience in the vicinity of French events. Similarly, a European American does not have a minority experience simply by being the only white person in a group of blacks; he or she is really having a dominant-culture experience in a minority situation. And certainly a man does not have a woman's experience simply by living with one; men are having their own experience in the vicinity of women. This doesn't mean that it is impossible to have an alternative cultural experience; it just means that we must perceive the world in an alternative way to have that kind of experience.

The process of re-organizing our perception of the world to enable an alternative experience is called "empathy." Empathy allows us to intentionally shift our perspective towards that of another culture and eventually towards that of another person in that cultural context. By allowing ourselves to have an embodied experience of the world through the alternative perspective, we temporarily expand our worldview to include that alternative way of being. When we enact the alternative experience in our behavior, we are adapting (not assimilating, not acculturating) to the other culture. At any moment we can choose to enact our primary cultural experience. In the process of constructivist empathy, we do not lose ourselves; we gain authentic alternative selves.

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See Also: Intercultural Communication, Stereotypes/Generalizations, Collective Consciousness

Further Reading:

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