Research in Intercultural Communication:
State of the Art

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BACKGROUND

Let me say before I begin, that my remarks apply primarily to research in the field of *intercultural communication, within the United States.*

In order to understand where we are, we need to understand where we've been. I would like to make a case that in some ways we have come full circle in our scholarly endeavors, from the early days of the field. At the same time, I think that we are not in the same place we started from.

While scholars have been trying to understand intercultural relations since the beginning of time, many scholars trace the contemporary study of intercultural communication to the founding of the Foreign Service Institute after WW2. Predeparture training had been limited to language study and many overseas workers realized that they needed more extensive preparation in order to be truly effective. In response to this need, the FSI was founded and staffed by anthropologists and linguists, including E. T. Hall and Ray Birdwhistell. These scholars applied the linguistic model to the study of "microculture" (nonverbal communication) and developed skill-based communication training programs for foreign diplomats (See Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990 for a more thorough history of the field of intercultural communication).

In the 60's and 70's, the study of intercultural interaction grew. Professional organizations were founded (e.g., SIETAR); the influence of anthropology receded, and the field found a home in the communication discipline; divisions within communication associations (e.g., Speech Communication Association, International Communication Association) were formed. Textbooks were written and courses--undergraduate and graduate--were taught (Hoopes, 1977).

Characteristics of the developing field in the 60's and 70's:

1) Interdisciplinary
Harman and Briggs (1991) report the results of a survey of SIETAR members' perceptions of the contributions of various disciplines to the field of intercultural communication. Anthropology, linguistics, international relations, psychology were among the top contributors.

2) Theory and Practice were firmly wedded
Because the field arose from practical concerns, practice was very important, and scholars were interested in the application of theory (see Landis & Brislin, 1983). For example, most of the SIETAR governing council members were academicians; IJIR, a research journal was sponsored by SIETAR; most courses had both (some) theory and skills (Hoopes 1977).

3) Aparadigmatic in the Kuhnian sense
The third characteristic is related to the first two. Since the field was interdisciplinary and there was a major concern with practice, there was no consensually accepted paradigmatic framework for developing theory or training (Kuhn, 1970). Scholars and practitioners came from many academic and experiential backgrounds.

4) Interest in both domestic and international cultures
While the field originated in the international domain, there was an interest in domestic intercultural communication. About 1/3 of the intercultural communication courses had an international focus, about 1/3 a domestic focus and about 1/3 included both foci. Several early intercultural communication texts were on interracial communication (e.g., Rich, 1974; Smith (Molefi K. Asante), 1973).

THE 1980'S

The 1980's represented a major shift in the field.

1. Predominance of the Social Science Paradigm
During the 1980's there were two competing research paradigms in Communication: the *Subjective* (influenced more by anthropology, rhetoric, the humanities) and the *Objective* (the social science paradigm, influenced by psychology, sociology, Western) (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989).

Many communication scholars believed that academic respectability could be gained only by adopting the more objective social science tradition and intercultural communication scholars were no exception. Respectability seemed especially important because this sub-discipline was often viewed as a fad, tangential to real academic inquiry (Smith, 1982).

a. In the traditional social science paradigm, theory building and rigorous research was paramount rather than practice/application (Gudykunst, 1983). And this decade saw a decline in dialogue between researchers and practitioners. This decline was seen in SIETAR, where many practitioners felt that research findings contributed little to their professional expertise. By 1990, most SIETAR Governing Council members were trainers, not researchers, and most members seemed to be more interested in application than in research. It should also be noted that many scholars investigating intercultural communication did not attend SIETAR congresses and were sometimes out of touch with the experiential world of intercultural communication.

b. Communication research based on the social science model often neglected the contextual dimensions (historical, social, political) of intercultural interaction (there were exceptions, Brislin, 1981) and the communication models were often acontextual.

e.g., Much research was devoted to acontextual cross cultural comparisons of "Americans" and individuals from other countries, trying to identify differences in values, communication style, etc.

2. <u>Emphasis was on international contexts</u>.
Culture was primarily studied on the national level, ethnicity and interethnic communication was largely ignored.

3. <u>Issues of Power and Dominance were often ignored</u>
Many communication researchers were from privileged classes, for whom privilege and power were not visible. The voices of research participants (less privileged) were often not heard in the studies about them (There were exceptions: See Folb, 1991; Triandis, 1983; Brislin, 1988; Singer, 1987). There were protesting voices, but they were often not heard (see Asante, 1987; Ribeau, 1994).

CURRENT TRENDS

I think there is a refreshing return to the foundations of the field. I think that many of us are admitting that the social science paradigm has been limiting and that we often don't know enough to develop theories in the strictest sense (that are universal, that would be applicable in many different cultural settings),

or that theory-building and ways of knowing as we've defined them don't always work when applied to everyday intercultural interaction.

The Social science legacy, while it granted some degree of respectability, has also left some challenges.

I will identify some of the major themes or influences (many overlapping) and then briefly present several examples of current research endeavors.

I should also say that there were some scholars who cautioned against adopting the social science model, (e.g., William Howell, 1979), but they were rarely published in the major communication journals.

I should also note that a rising influence has been critical theory and cultural studies, which grew out of European academic tradition, German, French (Foucault, Derrida) and British (Stuart Hall, Richard Hebdige). These scholars have influenced intellectual thought in the United States, in sociology, psychology, in literature, education, women's studies (e.g., Henry Giroux, Renate Rosaldo, bell hooks). Some influence in communication, primarily in media studies and somewhat in organizational communication (Grossberg, Nelson & Treichler, 1992), but really hasn't been integrated into intercultural communication scholarship (see Nakayama & Martin, 1993).

1) <u>There is a renewed interest in promoting dialogue between researchers and practitioners</u>. Many of the graduate students I teach, and my colleagues, particularly those with a lot of intercultural experience or multicultural backgrounds are not interested in theories that bear no relevance to their lives. They want to know the utility of the theory and research.

Many are very active in their own communities, very committed to applying what they learn to improve intercultural communication in everyday life.

e.g., one graduate student (Polish) is studying how Polish Americans react to Polish jokes and in addition to categorizing different reactions/communicative strategies (previous research), she is also trying to discover how they may try to reposition themselves to gain power that is lost at their expense.

2) There is a renewed emphasis on the importance of understanding the context of intercultural interaction: the historical, social, and political contexts.

(I realize this is not a new issue. A. Smith (1982) wrote a scathing indictment of the field of intercultural communication, stating that the appropriate focus of scholars should be on eliminating poverty, oppression and not on understanding sojourner communication and other frivolous topics. P. Rohrlich in 1987 wrote a response of sorts, saying that while policy issues were important, that still we needed to understand interpersonal intercultural interaction.)

So in some ways, it may be a difference of what level of interaction (governmental vs interpersonal) should be the focus, but I think it goes beyond this. There has been a general disregard for context. Why don't U. S. communication texts include information about the *history* of contact between groups of people (in the United States and internationally), or implications of institutional racism for interaction in the United States?).

Brislin has discussed this (1981, 1993) and so has Gudykunst (1986) and others who are developing theories of intergroup communication.

3) Conceptually, culture is being defined more broadly to include once again, ethnicity, race or even more broadly, gender, age, sexual orientation. Scholars are also trying to understand the intersections of national culture, ethnicity, gender, class etc.

There is a return to interest in domestic intercultural communication, communication between people within national boundaries (in the United States and abroad). This is not without its challenges. Some on academic campuses see these two interests--domestic vs international--as in direct competition, for attention, resources etc.

4) A recognition that groups are not entirely homogeneous. Americans (more specifically people from the United States), and therefore others are not monolithic peoples. A refining of our ideas about group characteristics. More emphasis on identity-- the notion that most of us belong to many groups that influence our thinking and behavior, and that many of us live on the margins of identity groups (Bennett 1994).

5) A recognition that we need to understand the role of power in intercultural communication research.
As scholars we need to understand how power and power differentials affect intercultural interactions (some examples below). But in addition, we need to understand the role of power in our *investigations* of intercultural communication. While this issue has been addressed by anthropologists (e.g., Rosaldo, 1989) and psychologists, it has been less addressed in communication (Ribeau, 1994).

CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH EXAMPLES

To summarize, scholarship is going in new directions, perhaps there is a paradigm shift. I believe that this will result ultimately in more creative, more inclusive, more insightful research. However, it also means a temporary crisis in the academy (for intercultural communication scholars). Once we step out of the rather neat western social science tradition of intellectual inquiry, we are on less sure ground.

Preparadigmatic/Methodologically
There are several competing, complementary paradigms. I believe there is a more inclusive attitude now, rather than seeing research paradigms as right or wrong, they are viewed as particular approaches to knowledge and inquiry (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989). I will speak about three research examples.

A). There is still an interest in the **social science paradigm**, but there is more concern about equivalency, cultural appropriateness, and understanding context in developing universal frameworks, in working between etic and emic perspectives (Brislin 1993).

Intercultural Communication Research

e.g., Communication Acccomodating theory (CAT), a composite of Ethnolinguistic theory and Speech Accommodation theory. Built on work of Tajfel and Turner, based on interactant's identification with own group, attitudes toward other interactant's group, and relative perceived power of two groups (dominant/subordinate), predicts how interactants may accommodate in their nonverbal and speaking patterns (see Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991;, Gallois et al, 1988).

Cross Cultural Communication Research

e.g., Interethnic communication, Hecht and Colleagues trying to develop models of interethnic communication that leads to satisfying and effective communication. Communication is conceptualized as problematic, always needing adjusting and adaptation by both interactants. Model includes Identity, Communication Issues, Conversational Strategies and Outcomes. Research focuses on what issues are seen as problematic by particular cultural groups and what conversational strategies are employed to improve the communication to ensure effective communication. See: Hecht et al, 1989, 1992; Martin et al, 1994.

Multimethods: interviewing, diaries, surveys, focus groups

Has been applied to Mexican-American, African American and European Americans, using both emic and etic perspectives.

One finding: that power and powerlessness in interactions--unaccounted for in previous conceptualizations of effectiveness--is often very important in interethnic communication.

e.g., other comparisons of communication behavior

Scholars continue to make cross cultural comparisons of communication, but I think there is more emphasis on not treating groups as monolithic and homogeneous (Americans vs. Japanese), but recognizing the diversity within groups.

See: Martin, Hammer & Bradford (1994) comparisons of competent communication behaviors, Collier's (1991) comparison of conflict communication, Ting-Toomey's (1986) study of conflict styles.

B) There is a branch of research, **cultural communication** which has its foundations in anthropology and sociolinguistics, (e.g., Hymes' ethnography of communication), where scholars conduct careful descriptive studies of communication patterns within one cultural group. They use mostly participant observation methods, interviewing etc. The idea here is that we need studies of intra-cultural communication before we can understand intercultural communication (Shuter, 1990).

Some examples:
Gerry Philipsen's study of communication in a working class community, "Teamsterville" in Chicago; Donal Carbaugh, who has conducted numerous studies of U. S. (primarily European-American) communication patterns from ranging from "Talk Show communication" to more general studies; Charles Braithwaite's study of Vietnam vets' communication, Tamar Katriel, an Israeli scholar who described Israeli and Arab patterns of speaking. See Carbaugh's (1990) edited volume for examples of this research.

Some of these scholars are interested in intercultural contact and/or cross cultural comparisons (e.g. Braithwaite's (1990) meta-analysis of the role of silence in many cultural groups).

Some cultural communication scholars are questioning who has a right to speak for whom. There has been much written about this and I won't belabor the point (e.g., Standfield & Dennis, 1992; Rosaldo, 1989). There is much more caution about methods used in ethnographic research. Do the privileged have a right to speak for the less privileged? Some think we should describe those cultural groups of which we are members (See methodology of Indigenous Ethnography, Gonzalez & Krizek, 1994). Prof. Gonzalez leads groups of graduate students to Native American reservations, into Mexican-Indian communities in Mexico and has them study *themselves* in this process.

There is an edited collection of pieces "Our Voices" (Gonzalez, Houston, & Chen 1994) that loosely represents this tradition.

C) Finally, there are some of us who are trying to move beyond paradigms to apply the multicultural perspective to research inquiry. This research is based on the assumption that *any* research paradigm is limiting, that all researchers are limited by their own experience and world view (Hammersly, 1992), and that one strategy may be to engage in multiperspectival, inter-paradigmatic research in multicultural research teams (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989).

An example of this is a current study that I and colleagues at ASU are working on, investigating White ethnicity, trying to understand what it means to be White in the United States. The three of us come from different research traditions (a critical position, an ethnographic perspective, and a social science tradition) and represent ethnic and gender diversity.

In this study, the guiding research question is "how do Whites understand being white in the United States and how does this influence intercultural communication?" Any one of the research paradigms would be limited in understanding the often invisibleness of being white in the United States (McIntosh, 1993). We are using multiple methods and multiple perspectives at each stage of the research.

As a first step, we conducted a preliminary investigation in which we asked approximately 100 white college students about their preferences for ethnic labels--there is a great deal of previous research investigating the meaning of labels/ethnic terms for minority groups, but little on majority groups. We simply asked students to identify a "proper term to be used for 'Anglos,'" From this survey, there were seven ethnic labels which were consistently identified by these students: Anglo, Caucasian, Euro-American, European American, WASP, White and White American. Perhaps more interesting was the resistance displayed by these student to identifying these labels. This display of resistance suggested that perhaps labelling held a different meaning for whites than for other individuals and led to a critical rhetorical exploration of discourse of whiteness (Nakayama & Krizek, 1993). The next step is to extend our preliminary research by systematically investigating which ethnic labels are preferred by white Americans and what these labels mean to those who are labelled. For this study, we employed a social science type questionnaire with likert type scales and some open ended questions. We are in the process of interpreting these data now.

We are also working on a theoretical piece which will provide an examplar/case study for this kind of research. As we discuss the project, methods, and data interpretation we are recording our conversations and the ethnographer is taking the lead in helping us develop themes or a protocol for conducting this kind of research.

To be continued. . . .

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