The blindspots and biases of intercultural communication studies: A discussion on episteme and doxa in a field

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Abstract

As with other evolving fields within the realms of science the ontological assumptions and epistemological aspirations of intercultural communication studies are matters of debate and disagreement. Differently put, the very point of take-off from which studies in this field are conducted is seldom scrutinized. This being said, this paper identifies and discusses a number of blindspots and biases of intercultural communication studies – e.g. the reluctance or inability to account for analytical ethnocentrism ('home blindness'), heterocentrism (the unreflected and disproportionate focus on difference) or xenocentrism (the unreflected and disproportionate focus on 'the other'). Additionally, normativism (the unreflected assumption that intercultural communication has desirable effects on people's prejudices), cultural relativism versus absolutism, and particularism versus universalism are discussed. It is concluded that if the blindspots and biases of intercultural communication studies are overlooked, and thus the researcher is held as a cultural constant, the understanding of intercultural communication as *interaction* between *two* unavoidably and equally cultural interlocutors is deficient. Inspired by classical hermeneutics and discourse analysis it is therefore argued that intercultural communication studies researchers must declare their ontological assumptions and epistemological aspirations more actively and systematically.

Keywords: epistemology, ontology, analytical ethnocentrism, heterocentrism,

Intercultural communication: A moving target

> Two widely divergent but interrelated experiences, psychoanalysis and work as an anthropologist, have led me to the belief that in his strivings for order, Western man has created chaos by denying that part of his self that integrates while enshrining the parts that fragment experience. (Hall, 1981: 9).

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century intercultural communication remains a divergent field. In parts of the world and in the USA in particular, intercultural communication largely fulfils conventional criteria of scientific disciplines. In the Nordic countries and Europe as a whole, the picture remains less clear. Here intercultural communication is viewed as an interaction context or as a field of knowledge and research with loose contours, neither viewed as a traditional academic discipline, anchored in relatively coherent and widely accepted subject canon, nor organized as such. Rather, the field houses an array of theoretical concepts with roots in communication studies, anthropology, sociology, semantics, semiotics, linguistics, rhetoric, social psychology, psychology, media studies etc. Recently social philosophy, postcolonial theory, discourse analysis and gender studies have exerted theoretical influence on the field.

Research methods in the field also exhibit great variation: interviews, observations, cultural analysis, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, reception studies, surveys etc are all used for data collection.

Moreover, intercultural communication has become the concern of human and social scientist from many academic disciplines and scholarly traditions and has been explored in uncountable empirical settings. E.g. pedagogues study intercultural classroom communication, anthropologists symbol use, linguists crosscultural interfaces of language, culture and cognition, sociologists the hybridization and creolization of cultures and languages, psychologists cultural influence on human perception, discourse analysts discourses on cultural diversity and globalization, health sciences cultural variations in the understanding of (un)health, media researchers cultural influences on media reception, literature researchers cultural biases and eurocentrism in literature, and organizational researchers cultural variations in corporate culture and management.

Given the multiplicity of the field it is not surprising that one finds competing or even conflicting ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions about intercultural communica-tion. Questions of debate are, for instance, to what extent are human beings influenced by structural conditions, is value-free knowledge obtainable or merely a figment of the brain, or does an increased understanding of intercultural communication have desirable effects on people's prejudices.

The role of human reflection, interpretation, sense-making and cultural meanings are at the heart of matters in studies of intercultural communication (Illman & Nynäs 2005; Stier 2009).To further complicate matters there are numerous, and often mutually inconsistent, definitions of culture, communication and intercultural communication (see Hall 1959; Krober & Kluckhohn 1952; Hofstede 1984; Baldwin & Lindsley 1994; Gudykunst & Kim 2003).

Even if the field's ontological, epistemological and axiological disagreements are matters of constant (yet not necessarily sufficient) debate, there is a body of transdisciplinary 'truths' and areas of tacit *agreement* which seldom are scrutinized. Similarly, light is rarely shed upon the points of take-off from which studies are conducted. Consequently, there are a set of blind spots and biases of intercultural communication studies that deserve our attention.

Aim and focus

This being said, this paper identifies and discusses a set of blindspots and biases of intercultural communication studies. These are the reluctance or inability to account for analytical ethnocentrism ('home blindness'), heterocentrism (the unreflected and disproportionate focus on difference) or xenocentrism (the unreflected and disproportionate focus on 'the other'). Additionally, normativism (the unreflected assumption that intercultural communication has desirable effects on people's prejudices), cultural relativism versus absolutism, and particularism versus universalism are discussed. I draw attention to these questions since they pose *scientific* dilemmas – not to argue for a certain position, nor to resolve them once and for all, one reason being that this seems undoable.

Human egocentrism and ethnocentrism

'Does the fish know he or she is swimming in water?' This question reveals an unavoidable dilemma of intercultural communications studies. We claim that, via the processes of socialization or alternatively enculturation, human beings internalise the culture in which they grow up and *with* which they interact (see Berger & Luckmann 1966). Once internalized, our culture becomes objectified, that is, we take it for granted and do not reflect over it for the most part. Metaphorically speaking, our culture becomes the lenses through which we see and make sense of the world. Shaped by particular culture, the lenses provide merely an ethnocentric (and personalized) version of the world.

This bias deceptively permeates also the very study of intercultural communication. The field – as we know it – is predominantly a North American and European field. West and Turner (2000: 33) writes: ... you should be aware that much of what we know and how we relate is a result of a Western model of thinking – that is, many of us interpret events and behavior through a European (American) lens...' Nota bene: what we *do not* (yet!) know is also a result of a Western model of thinking

As teachers of intercultural communication we often claim that those who do not belong to a culture are more prone to detect peculiarities and idiosyncrasies that members do not notice, simply because the

latter are so enmeshed in their culture. At the same time, non-members typically fail to completely appreciate and understand social expectations and cultural codes that members both are aware of and familiar with. This being said, can we ever fully understand another culture or even another person? As Hall proclaims (1981: 69): '... no individual will ever really understand himself. The complexity is too great and there is not the time to constantly take things apart and examine them.'

Then, can we ever fully understand *another person from another culture*? Can we look at the lenses with which we see the world? To what extent are we incapable of scrutinizing our own ethnocentrism and conception of the world? Needless to say, these questions are of utmost significance in intercultural communication studies since they point to the fact that also researchers and teachers are cultural products – and to the epistemological dilemmas when studying culture. This notwithstanding it is common that this seminal question for intercultural communication studies merely is mentioned in passing or is conveniently left to the students or scientific audiences to themselves to find a plausible answer to.

Analytical ethnocentrism

With the study of culture and intercultural interaction as a primary concern, as intercultural communication researchers we repeatedly posit the cultural construction of the world. As teachers we maintain the importance of cultural awareness, intercultural competence and communication skills. 'Intercultural' people are contrastive images of ethnocentric or xenophobic people. Ethnocentrism is said to distort our view of other cultures and the world as such and should, therefore, as much as possible, be the object of intervention and education. Rogers and Steinfatt (1999) write:

> Many of us perceive the world through the eyes of a single culture, surrounded by other people with similar views. .//.. The ability to see the world from different points of view is fundamental to the process of becoming intercultural. While students can study intercultural communication from their own single point of view, they will not learn or retain as much as students who are aware of multiple perspectives. This is not to say that the student's existing point of view is wrong and another one is right. Rather, it is to suggest that there are different ways of thinking and that such differences must be recognized and respected. (p. 2-3).

The authors are all but unique in these claims (I myself claim these things all the time!) and several questions come to mind. To what do 'similar' views refer – cultural knowledge, ideology, personal opinions or attitudes? Is not this claim in itself an example of an overgeneralization? (Often variations in beliefs, attitudes and values within a cultural group are greater that the variations between groups.) Also, to what extent do people of a given culture share beliefs? Where do we draw the demarcation line between cultures? On what level do we analyze cultures? Yet another question is: in what position are we and how open are we to claim that narrow-mindedness should yield to openness? Is not this just an example *par excellence* or cultural bias? Should we in our openness accept the view points of those who we view as narrow-minded?

When seeking plausible answers to these questions as intercultural communication researchers and teachers, how imprisoned are we by our ethnocentrism, culture, professional training or ideological convictions?

As we approach other cultures and intercultural interaction a wide range of things about intercultural communication is taken-for-granted. E.g. many of us are in this business not to study why intercultural communication is important to study, but *because* it is important to study. Or we assume that that intercultural training has a positive impact on people's beliefs and actions, that cultural diversity is enriching, that culture differences may cause misunderstandings or interpersonal friction or political conflicts, that it ethnocentrism is counter-productive to human interaction.

This being said, the idea that we as researchers and teachers of intercultural communication and promoters of intercultural understanding are less biased, more open and better equipped to understand others is not far off. Bluntly put, we may hopefully be a little less ignorant than many other people, but perhaps we are also more arrogant and self-sufficient? Our ability and willingness to look ourselves in the mirror and scrutinize (not only declare our preconceptions, but analyze the implications of these on research and teaching) our own frame of reference is therefore essential.

Heterocentrism

Much has been written on heterophily (see for instance Bauman 1989), the degree to which interlocutors are (perceiving one another as) unlike (Steinfatt & Rogers 1999), and the notion of difference, deviance and outsiders (see for instance Becker 1963). Understanding the anatomy of the perceptions people uphold and social constructions of difference is crucial in order to grasp the intercultural communication phenomenon. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) define intercultural communication as: "...a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from *different* cultures."[italics mine]. Similarly, West and Turner (2000: 32) writes that '[i]n the intercultural context..//..researchers and theorists purposely explore the interactions and events between and among people of *different* [italics mine] cultures.'

Thus, intercultural communication pertains to interplay (voluntary or involuntary) with *others*, where the interlocutors construct one another as a different (or deviant) in some given respects. With references to Brown (1991), Triandis (1994: 5) modifies the picture: 'Even while we point to differences between cultures and philosophical outlooks, our discussion is complicated by the fact that humans are more similar to one another than they are different...'

This notwithstanding the preoccupation with difference cuts across the entire field of intercultural communication. Generally speaking, cultural differences are believed to be more prevalent than all-human commonalities (Stier 2004/2009). Being mutually exclusive, dichotomies such as: 'similar – dissimilar'; 'different – not different'; or 'like – unlike' fuel the widespread notion of mankind as one of *mainly* multiplicity and diversity, not one of community and transcultural qualities. This has led to an unreflected and disproportionate preoccupation with difference. This blindspot or bias I prefer to call *heterocentrism,* and it makes us ignorant or reluctant to critically discuss or analyze how we sustain the construction of people as different.

Recognizing the fundamental principle in communication studies, that communicating is *acting*, by referring to intercultural communication as 'facing the different' whatever or whoever constructed as different becomes different. For naming is inevitably framing something within a certain context or an existing discourse. Intercultural communication is not limited to communication with those perceived or are constructed as different. Equally important is how we conceptualize and make sense of such interaction. For these reasons intercultural communication researchers and teachers must turn their scientific stare to themselves and also to talk of cultural *variation* and thereby, to a larger extent, equally account for human similarities and dissimilarities.

Xenocentrism

Heterocentrism has a conceptual relative in xenocentrism. Just as intercultural communication is described as interaction with *others*, it is depicted as a process in which such others are constructed as *strange*. In the literature 'strange' carries an ambiguous meaning: it refers to unknown or unfamiliar people but also to those who are peculiar or weird. In other words: in intercultural communication studies strangers are people who are unfamiliar and heterophilous to one another (Steinfatt & Rogers 1999).

With references to the classical sociologists Georg Simmel (1908) and Alfred Schutz (1944) the sheer presence of and interaction with strangers is believed to evoke a sense of insecurity, uneasiness, or anxiety in people, regardless of these people's culture, ethnicity, social class, belonging, gender, age, profession or education. This claim underscores the idea that intercultural communication qualitatively differs from other communication. The notions of the stranger and of 'culture shock' (Oberg 1960) are nowadays familiar ideas for people outside academia.

The very existence of words for 'strangers' in many cultures have led us to uncritically ascribe the same emotional and cultural value to strangers in other cultures as we do in our own. Though we find words with negative connotations for strangers in many languages, more elaborate research is need to substantiate the tacit assumption that strangers 'in many or most cultures' are conceived of as threatening, uncivilized, primitive etc., one reason being that there are many historical testimonies where the arrival of strangers has been met with curiosity, hospitality and mutual respect. In the intercultural communication field accounts of such interaction are by far less common than those of misunderstandings, clashes and mutual suspicion.

Needless to say, people can come across as different, without being viewed as strangers, just as strangers can be viewed as similar to us. Many of us would agree that not every communicative encounter with a stranger is 'intercultural', but would we agree that not all intercultural communication is an interaction with strangers?

The problem-imperative

In their writings on intercultural communication Gudykunst and Kim (2005) make no claims about the effectiveness of such communication: 'Effectiveness is a separate dimension, but to say that two people engaged in intercultural communication is not to say that they have understood each other' (p. 18). Yet, and given the history of the field (see Bochner 1982; Rogers & Steinfatt 1999), it is unsurprising that focus on problems, misunderstandings, culture clashes and conflicts has and still characterizes much of the discourse on intercultural communication. At the common-sensual level many people conceive of a more or less causal relationship between cultural homogeneity and efficient, conflict-free communication on the one hand, and between cultural heterogeneity and inefficient, conflict-laden communication on the other. Of course, intercultural communication may very well be more problematic (or challenging) than *intra*cultural communication. Still, much intracultural communication causes problems and interpersonal conflicts, while much intercultural communication is both efficient and void of friction. Yet, one analytical implication of this is a largely unnoticed over-emphasis on and expectation to address and bridge communication problems – a bias in intercultural communication studies which elsewhere (Stier 2004) has been referred to as the *problem imperative*.

In part this bias originates in the assumption that culture is an extremely potent determinant of people's actions, interpersonal conflicts and communication problems. West and Turner (2000: 32-33) writes: '...study in the intercultural communication context means that researchers inherently accept the fact that human behaviour is culturally based. In other words, culture structures how we act.'

Although many intercultural communication studies researchers (including I) would agree with this proposition, the issue of 'how much culture impacts on actions' as well as the relative salience of culture as a behavioural determinant vis-à-vis other determinants is more seldom debated. Thus, it is not uncommon that cultural background serves as a 'garbage-can explanation' (Stier 2009) for a wide range of phenomena such as management styles, views on gender equality, criminality, poor health, marginality etc. Not always spelled out, but merely implied, 'cultural factors' enjoy a privileged explanatory position in intercultural communication studies literature, whereas analyses at the *intersection* of personality traits, situational factors, structural conditions *and* cultural background are more uncommon.

In addition to this, there is an absence of power analyses in much of intercultural communication research. Such analyses must not be limited to structural communication conditions at the macro level. Rather, micro analyses (e.g. drawing on conversation analysis and discourse psychology) of how power is exercised in interpersonal space, and in intercultural settings, by and large remain an underexplored scientific territory.

Normativism

Furthermore, the field of intercultural communication studies is permeated by ideological *normativism* – a fundamental axiological assumption (or personal conviction) that the research and education in intercultural communication both *should* contribute to and *can* provide powerful means to counteract prejudice, ethnocentrism, cultural clashes, racism and hatred with roots in dysfunctional communication over cultural boundaries. Many of us are in this business just to bridge or transgress cultural boundaries with the intent to create a better, more tolerant world.

Problems arise when ideological *normativism* and political rhetoric are uncritically transformed into scientific assumptions, when intercultural miscommunication is treated uncritically as 'cultural' problems, without or little consideration given to the multidimensional character of human interaction where structural, organizational, individual or contextual factors are equally significant determinants of communication.

Similarly, we *believe* that intercultural interaction has 'positive' effects on people's prejudice and ethnocentrism. For example, the 'contact hypothesis' suggests that the more we are exposed to strangers

the less hostile we become. (It must be noted that the 'reversed contact hypothesis' claims the opposite, namely that there are people who become more prejudiced and hostile as their interaction with strangers intensifies). Regardless of which hypothesis is the most plausible one; how many of us have actually verified these hypotheses in research?

Another example is how a German colleague openly (and for some of our colleagues provocatively) at a previous NIC-conference questioned the statement that the Inuits have 30 different words (or 50 depending who you ask) for 'snow'. Do we know this for a *fact* or do we simply *believe* it? The point it is a simple one: by conducting highly quality research we constantly, systematically and critically need to scrutinize our ontological assumptions and scientific truths from the past.

Relativism, absolutism, particularism and universalism

In the human and social sciences there has been traditionally three overall perspectives on 'other' cultures: evolutionistic, relativistic and intercultural perspectives (Bel Habib 1992; see also Illman & Nynäs 2005).

During the 1800s a number of cultural evolution theories were introduced. According to these, African and Asian cultures (Japan being an exception) were viewed as 'primitive', 'uncivilized', 'premodern' or 'exotic', whereas Europe and North America (unsurprisingly!) were depicted as 'civilized', 'modern' or 'advanced'. These theories provided moral support for the Europeans' hegemonic ambitions to colonize the world and also prescribed a moral responsibility for them to 'enlighten' the non-Europeans (Bel Habib 1992; Illman & Nynäs 2005). These ideas were occasionally questioned and old epithets were substituted for new ones, less burdened by history, and yet the Eurocentric worldview remained.

Over time, intensified political and scientific criticism laid a more solid foundation for an alternative perspective: *cultural relativism*. Responding to universalistic claims (i.e. suggesting there are all-human patterns of culture and communication) and instead recognizing that such patterns are always uniquely specific to a particular culture (particularism), cultural relativism came, on the one hand, to signify a scientific perspective claiming that culturally derivable behavior can only be understood within the realms of people's culture (Gudykunst & Kim 2003; Rogers & Steinfatt 1999). This means that if we want to understand people and their motives for action, we have to do it from the inside of their culture – using what Pike (1966) calls an *emic* approach. On the other hand, cultural relativism housed the normative claim that all cultures are of equal value and must be respected for their unique characteristics. Herskovits (1950: 76) writes that cultural relativism:

> … is a philosophy which, in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity in every body of custom, and on the deed for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own.

The dilemma inherent in cultural relativism is obvious. Should cultural tolerance extend to accepting actions and views at odd with the most fundamental principles and values that a society strives to uphold? Or are there all-human principles and values that we cannot and must not compromise with and cultural peculiarities we must not tolerate? Debating these issues has a focal place within an intercultural perspective (Stier 2009) – a claim to which many in the field of intercultural communication studies adhere.

It may be provocative to say that we as researchers, at least in one area, are clearly absolutistic – i.e. in science. If not in their rhetoric so at least in practice and actions, many academics reveal attitudes or convictions that science enjoys a privileged (or objective) helicopter position, largely void of cultural material and metaphysics. The question is then: as open-minded, tolerant cultural relativists are we willing to dispose of our culturally founded views on logics, rationality, procedures, linearity, scientific knowledge, and yield to intuition, beliefs, and spirituality and Eastern holism? One could fairly claim that many of us are more open to these impulses today than before, yet it is doubtful if we are truly willing to abandon these principles, though the intercultural communication researcher or teacher in us tells us that science is one among many cultural artifacts.

Conclusions

Appreciating the paradigmatic multiplicity and empirical richness of intercultural communication studies this discussion has revolved around a several areas of consideration for us involved in this field. The objective has not been to settle these, in many respects, classical questions and unsolvable dilemmas once and for all, but merely to bring them to the foreground of scientific debate. This debate is crucial – since scientific claims constantly need to be corroborated, revised or discarded – one reason being that over time they turn into 'truths' or commonly held beliefs rather than scientific knowledge.

The thesis put forward here is that intercultural communication studies house a number of blindspots and biases. These are the reluctance or inability to account for analytical ethnocentrism, heterocentrism, xenocentrism, normativism and for the assumptions located in the intersection of cultural relativism, absolutism, particularism and universalism. If these blindspots and biases are overlooked or not taken seriously, and the researcher, teacher or the view of science and scientific knowledge are held as cultural constants, the understanding of intercultural communication as *interaction* between *two* cultural interlocutors is deficient.

As researchers we must ask ourselves: Do we know things for a *fact* or do we simply *believe* them? To what degree are we uncritically and unintentionally reproducing 'knowledge' of a totemic character? We must scrutinize our assumptions about the subject-canon we teach, teaching methods, selection of course literature, student-faculty interaction and classroom dialogue. We must be student-oriented, committed and sensitive to what is going on in the student groups (Stier 2003).

The intercultural context is different from other contexts. According to West and Turner (2000): '[i]t is the only context that specifically addresses culture. Although some contexts, such as the organizational context, comprise research on racial and ethnic cultures, this work is often ancillary, with culture being examined for its effects on the context'. Nonetheless, the field will benefit from more impulses from outside the 'cultural sphere', for example from gender studies, intersectional research, social constructionism and postcolonial theory. Echoing the ideas of classical hermeneutics and contemporary social constructionists and discourse analysis intercultural communication researchers must not merely *declare*, but also critically and systematically scrutinize, their ontological assumptions and epistemological aspirations. We may, for instance, ask ourselves why we talk of social *distance* rather than social *proximity*. Why the relative absence of power analyses? Why so little concern with the dialectics of structure and culture?

By the same token, it is necessary to account for and analyze the implications of the fact that ontology, epistemology, axiology, scientific knowledge and research procedures are cultural constructions in themselves. This means that intercultural analyses are always permeated by cultural meaning, symbols and values.

So as intercultural communication researchers and teacher we do not merely add to the knowledge on how cultural knowledge is constructed and cultural biases are reproduced; in fact, we are actors in these constructions, and as a man once said: 'A man never discloses so much of his character as when he describes another's'. This is both the yoke and the intriguing flavor of our academic deed.

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