OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION:
THE NEED FOR CRITICAL SELF-AWARENESS

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Introduction

This paper undertakes a theoretical analysis of potential obstacles to cross-cultural communication, as they emerge in face-to-face interaction. The position taken is that cooperative 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1987; Mead, 1934) oriented to achieving 'sympathetic understanding' (Cooley, 1934) is not a consistent characteristic of everyday interaction. The following factors can inhibit or facilitate the ability and/or willingness of interacting partners to elicit and maintain a sympathetic attitude: (1) habitual patterns of cognitive functioning such as definition and categorization; (2) attachment to binary polarities and hierarchical value systems as a means of organizing experience; (3) the tension between altruistic and egotistical tendencies (Hoffman, 1978); and (4) 'tolerance of ambiguity' (Frenkel-Brunswik, 1949; Maslow, 1950).

Perhaps the current postmodern challenge, as we try to foster pluralistic, multi-ethnic societies, is more than working to assure an egalitarian sharing of power and resources between the many emerging groups which vie for autonomy, rights and representation. Perhaps it is a time to return to a tenet of the modern project, that is to critical self-understanding, where we attempt to discern the characteristics we share despite our differences. Can we move beyond a mode of interaction which is typically strategic and egoistic, where otherness is defined as "an invitation to dominance or submission" (MacCannell, 1990, p. 26)?. Addressing such divisive conflictual tendencies with critical self-awareness may be our fundamental 'universal' challenge.

The current trend towards ethno-development arises within the context of unequal power relations between different groups. One could take the position that this trend is amplified by tendencies on the part of power-holding groups, which can afford a 'transparent' identity, to impose 'visible' identities onto non-power-holding groups. Or, one could take the view that ethno-development is a reactionary act of resistance against oppressive hegemonic ideologies. However, in defining an enemy, one has not necessarily addressed the problem. Getting caught up in the struggles of particular groups can lead to historically and contextually bound analyses of prejudice and inequality – it does not necessarily lead to a solution.

In trying to facilitate communication and the resolution of conflicts between different ethnic groups, as well as between ethnic groups and institutions, it may be worthwhile to return to an analysis of face-to-face interaction, and to discern what obstacles operate at this level. From this perspective, the key to a 'better' world lies imbedded in our collective conditioning. It is time to become critically aware of this hidden heritage. Why is it that we continue to ignore the larger 'human' reference group in defining ourselves? Since we remain dependent on the notion of a common enemy against which to unite, finding 'our own kind' generally means bonding with specific defensive minority groups (Mead, 1934). The task at hand may be to deconstruct this very notion. Rather than looking to blame the other (which may seem practical in the short term), each one of us must endeavor to discover in our own self, the various factors which constrain both the ability and desire to transcend differences and accept a common humanistic level of understanding.

A Recurring Pattern

Tossed on a turbulent sea fraught with impending danger, a life boat. At it's center, an orchestra plays. The musicians, eyes closed, are lost in the beauty of the sound they are creating. For those that might question their right to be in the orchestra, many defensive rationalizations await: duty (we play for your enjoyment); talent (we play so well); experience (we have been practising the longest); birth ascribed right (we are special); entitlement due to will (we've worked the hardest) ...

Around the orchestra, people gather in concentric circles. The innermost ring is as focused on the music as the musicians - ignoring the fact that they are afloat, that there is danger, and that they are very lucky to be at the center of this precarious vessel. The closer to the edge one moves, the more people are aware of the fact that this is a boat. They feel the discomforting spray of the cold water, and they hear human cries punctuate the music. Some, annoyed, ignore the screams and press in toward the center as much as they can. Others respond to the cries and look to pinpoint their origin - out to sea.

Around the very perimeter of the boat, the music is not much of a comfort. In fact, it is an irritating distraction from urgent matters at hand. People cling

to whatever they can, desperate to stay on the vessel. Those less fortunate hang over the edge, their feet dragging in the frigid water. There are those who cast their attention entirely out to sea; realizing the situation cannot continue indefinitely and eventually everyone risks drowning, they try to divine alternate modes of survival. And, there are those who push their neighbor over the side in order to secure a better position for themselves.

In the water, there are countless thousands, struggling to survive. Despite their differences, the timbre of their common, desperate human cry unites them. It is an ugly reality here. The music, distant, calls like a seductive muse, only making them lose their focus, possibly to sink below the surface. Some join forces in the hope of improving their chances. Others devise insurgent schemes - wanting to rotate places but keep the status-quo. And some, drift away.

One could argue that this hypothetical figurative model paints a familiar social structure, which recurs throughout history. Today, the white-male 'tribe' tends to play the music, while the rest of the world listens. During medieval times, many separate kingdoms upheld a similar lifeworld. Prior to that, a succession of empires rose and fell, with different faces at the helm. If the 'modern' ship is effectively dismantled, maybe it will simply splinter into countless miniature replicas, each with its own privileged and protected orchestra setting the tune - perpetuating it's specific hegemonic ideology. However, if we identify the characteristics fundamental to this model, we can potentially understand how our common response tends to perpetuate the pattern. These characteristics might be that: (1) we fear the unknown; (2) our fate is shared; (3) our positions are relative to one another; (4) we manage these positions; and thus (5) our interpersonal behavior tends to be strategic.

Indeed, there are genuine things to fear - radiating from death as the most extreme, to various levels of pain or displeasure. Since one cannot be sure how things will evolve as one endeavors to avoid that which is feared, there is a great deal of uncertainty, or ambiguity, to contend with. How secure one feels in the face of unknown threats may vary, but one thing is certain: no amount of effort will circumvent the inevitable, eventually.

We are not alone – for better or worse, the lot of human beings is shared. Although each person has the same fundamental survival problems to deal with, each can find different solutions. Temporary personal comfort can be attained or enhanced, but often at someone else's expense. Choice of action can depend to a large extent on how much entitlement over others one feels is deserving. The possible range of actions extends on a continuum between selfish egotism and self-less altruism (Hoffman, 1978). Cooley's (1956) notion of 'primary' groups (where interaction typically involves the entire personality) and 'secondary' groups (where contacts tend to be less personal and more segmentalized) may be relevant in this context. The tendency may be to lean towards altruism within one's primary group (which arguably, is selfish in that it protects the survival of one's own kind), and egotism when dealing with the secondary group.

Our personal 'situated realities' gain or lose value depending on their placement relative to other possible social positions. Dominant ideologies usually come with value systems which operate within binary opposites. Thus, we tend to see our positions as placed between extreme polarities – from good to bad, or best to worst. We define these positions (or identities) relationally along two dimensions: a horizontal continuum (in or out of groups) and a vertical continuum (above or below) (Strauss, 1969). Such social placement appraisal mechanisms may be as intrinsic to our sense of orientation as are the four cardinal points which position our physical presence. Perhaps both the unfortunate and the fortunate depend on the existence of a 'best' position; the hierarchy acts as a directive goal without which both might be disoriented.

We may justifiably wish to alter or maintain our positions. Since we may be uncertain about our claims to a new position, or about our ability to retain our present one, there may be need for a certain amount of artifice, posturing, or 'performance'. Goffman (1959, 1963, 1967) focused predominantly on such strategic, manipulative tendencies in social interaction. According to his dramaturgical perspective, interactants are actors who 'present' themselves as part of elaborate performances; social interaction being an elaborate scheme of strategic 'impression management'. Glaser and Strauss (in Manis & Meltzer, 1972) refer to the varying levels of candor in social interaction – about one's intent, motives, generally, one's identity in the face of the other – in terms of 'awareness contexts'. They isolate four types:

open, closed, suspicious and pretense. Interaction between equal status groups tends to be open or pretense-laden (if they cooperate in ignoring certain facts). Social interaction across status boundaries tends to be closed or suspicious. Awareness contexts can be ascribed by virtue of one's position, and if deliberately chosen, are selected for strategic purposes.

The picture of interaction which emerges deviates considerably from one where interactants aspire towards sympathetic understanding in an open awareness context. Taking into consideration the potential for insecurity, dissatisfaction, and the desire to selfishly improve one's lot, there is much to motivate the adoption of a deceptive and instrumental stance towards others. The tendency is to engage in strategic (offensive) or self-protective (defensive) communicative action. A good example is the practise of (deliberate or unconscious) 'status-forcing' - up or down, or in and out of groups (Strauss, 1969).

Whereas social situations within a traditional community might have been quite structured or predictable, in the postmodern, crowded, pluralistic social environment, they grow increasingly unpredictable. "The degree of unstructuredness results either from the uncertainty of the actors about which of their identities will be involved or from ambiguities in the meanings of the situation for the identities that have already become involved" (McCall & Simmons, 1966, p. 128). In facing such 'undefined' situations we may rely on common deep-seated habits. Perhaps the habits are universal and only our interpretation of them is identifiably different; the variation stemming from learned modes of thought and behavior, shaped by traditions and ideologies which have 'infected' (Boyd, in press) us and by our cumulative past experience. But instead of focusing on such differences, let's explore what is shared.

A Common Heritage

<u>Defining The Situation</u>

In order to manage experience, human beings define and interpret the world around them. In his theory of 'frame analysis', Goffman (1974) focused on the situational aspect of definition and pointed out that 'framing' is an ongoing process intrinsic to existence. Our frameworks, which are constantly vulnerable to rupture (or re-definition), are but a string of rather imperfect, temporary solutions to

the uncertain confusion of everyday life. In the case of social behavior, the fact that "human behavior involves responses to interpreted stimuli" (Manis & Meltzer, 1972, p. 7) is problematic since there is ample room for misinterpretation of each other's intent. Participants are usually satisfied if they achieve a 'working consensus' which enables them to go about their business (Goffman, 1959). However, taking into account a common definition of social reality as one based on 'in' and 'out' groups (or 'us' and 'them'), the problem of two people defining the same event differently escalates (Morris, 1969). In-groups use a special form of "moral alchemy: the same behavior must be differently evaluated according to the person who exhibits it" (Merton, 1957, p. 428). Thus, a vice exhibited by an out-group member is defined as a virtue in the character of an in-group member, or visa-versa. The 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton, 1957) logically follows; by anticipating a certain (defined) behavior, you may in fact call it out.

Cognitive Processes

As part of the act of defining, we endeavor to name or identify what we encounter in our environment. In doing so, we fall back on cognitive processes which facilitate the task - which summarize, narrow or limit the field of stimuli. Fundamental to these processes is the ability to categorize, which enables us to reduce both the complexity of the environment and the necessity for constant learning, and provides a direction for action - once something is named we act accordingly (Bruner, Goodnow & Austin, 1960). Such cognitive strategies, when applied to the perception (and judgment) of people, may hinder our ability to communicate.

Instead of taking each person at face value, we pre-define them before any action is taken. The judgmental classifications, based on perceptual and behavioral attributes which fit into 'known' categories, tend to distort reality, leading us into interaction with overgeneralized stereotyped constructions rather than unique others; depending on our past experience with that 'type of person', our encounter is biased from the start. Although some attribute differential attitudes (prejudice) and action (discrimination) towards others to 'faulty reasoning', there is research to support a position that they are a result of inherent limitations of our typical cognitive functions (Hamilton, in Carroll & Payne, 1976).
Categorization helps maintain positions of privilege

by creating boundaries around them. In defining someone of lower status, individuals can select preferred cues, or 'nonrational' determinants of criteriality which will advance their position (Bruner, Goodnow & Austin, 1960). In the process of maintaining a "hierarchy of opportunity" (Lee and Loveridge, 1987, p. 14), those at the top are likely to stigmatize those near the bottom. Disadvantaged interactants are forced to expend ample energy gaining credibility, and "attempts to alter or challenge this apparently normal set of hierarchical relationships" (Lee & Loveridge, 1987, preface) will be handicapped simply by the attitude taken toward them. The process whereby one gains a sense of superiority by attributing inferiority to the other, leaves interactants dependent on one another to define their identities within a 'master-slave dialectic' which renders both positions distorted and impoverished (Sarup, 1991).

Non-sympathetic bias in interaction can devolve from the act of validation which is part of the categorization process. In validating placement in a category, we use ultimate criterion - 'ideal-type' models. Judgment in terms of how well a particular individual or group measures up to the ideal-standard may influence the stance taken. In the same way, our self-perception may suffer; if we feel we do not measure up, we may become defensive in anticipation of a negative non-approving attitude. The classification of self or other in relation to ideal types is particularly vulnerable to guidelines set by 'popular' definitions, as in the standards perpetuated in mass-media portraits.

The Past as Obstacle

In defining our 'situated realities', we rely on past experience and on 'thinking as usual'. The very act of categorizing depends on having something in memory against which to compare. "Without memory life, communication, kinship, identity, and society itself are all impossible" (Wilden, 1987, p. 96). What is part of our 'memory system' - the personal as well as the cumulative culturally produced records - organizes current experience. Although the advantage of having retained patterns to fall back on is clear in terms of providing guidelines for behavior, it is worthwhile to consider that in some cases the past can be an obstacle which hinders communication.

Cross-cultural communication demands an open-minded approach, but if one is not willing to transcend the frameworks brought to the encounter, it becomes

unattainable. Reliance on customary modes of interaction can act as interference. 'Collective habits' or "deeply grooved systems of interaction ... modify the activities of individuals who perforce are caught up within" (Dewey, in Manis & Meltzer, 1972, p. 155), potentially resulting in contextually dictated modes of interaction where 'teams' put on joint performances tailored to a particular 'set' (Goffman, 1959). Such rule-bound interactants are akin to 'robots' infected by 'parasitic and dominative virtual organisms' which limit their ability to elaborate new shared meanings as part of communicative action (Boyd, in press). Memory systems mold unconscious psychological tendencies as well, giving rise to irrational beliefs and 'deep assumptions' (Weil, 1992). Such biases tend to be 'associational'; although created from memory records, they are not necessarily based on evidence.

The past can act as obstacle to communication due to loyalty to ancestral histories, which cast a shadow over the present. Simply because of continued presence at socially significant sites, a sense of innate superiority can be attained, leaving an unconscious imprint on patterns of interaction with certain others. Or, unconscious guilt and fear associated with owning advantaged positions for extended periods of time, can perpetuate a paranoid attitude (Kardiner & Ovesey, 1962). In the case of the oppressed, a history of disadvantage can lead to lowered self-esteem and various 'ego-defense mechanisms' (Freud, 1948) meant to deny, repress and bury true feelings and attitudes beneath a veneer of adherence to social protocol. Such adaptational processes can become a permanent part of one's character - operating as a form of 'internalized oppression' (hooks, 1992).

Aside from historical residues, maintained traditions or 'tested' modes of life can hinder communication as well. The belief in the comfort, safety and utility of limited kinship continues as part of our 'thinking as usual' and fosters differential treatment depending on group belonging. Kinship can be framed as a family unit or as a 'people', and involves the placing of 'us' at the center of the universe (Gordon, 1964). A sympathetic attitude only becomes possible if both interactants are on the 'us' side.

As much as traditional (collective) patterns of social organization can influence our selective attitude to others, our personal past record can cast it's own shadow. The psychodynamic patterns of interaction experienced during childhood can form schemas which shape subsequent

expectations and warp perceptions and reactions to others. Although schemas can have a powerful effect on primary group relationships, they can emerge in other encounters if enough 'cues' are recognized. An individual will then rely on 'affective defining' in categorizing the encounter and in choosing a direction for action; familiar (and preferred) hypotheses are selected over those which might be more accurate to the situation (Bruner, Goodnow & Austin, 1960). Communication is hindered as the individual attempts to re-enact 'scripts' (Abelson, in Carroll & Payne, 1976), and interprets the other with reference to the 'ghost' of a past actor in the drama. Something as subtle as the distance between a person's nose and mouth can be imprinted with learned associations, and when recognized, can trigger unconscious responses and predetermine patterns of social interaction (Goleman, 1992). Not recognizing anything can have a similar effect. In a highly unstructured encounter, familiar scripts may be called upon to relieve tension caused by an 'overload' of uncertainty. Since many everyday social encounters are ambiguous, such 'parasitic' responses may be quite common.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made to highlight covert processes and habits influencing face-to-face interaction, which can act as an obstacle to cross-cultural communication. The question is: can we become sufficiently self-aware to circumvent the potential negative aspects of these patterns? Working for external control of intergroup relationships will only take us part of the way toward resolving sources of conflict. Equal energy must be spent on making ourselves literate as to the covert mechanisms which govern much of our perception and behavior. Can we transcend ego-driven behavior and temper feelings of desire and fear? The process of self-definition as it intersects with ethno-development needs addressing as well. From a sociological perspective, identities emerge from social interaction, and are negotiated, temporal, situational and relative (Jackson, 1991). From a psychological perspective, an achieved (defined) identity is a developmental goal, necessary for maturity and well-being (Erikson, 1968). However, even as part of the 'self-actualization' process, a particular identification may need to be "temporary; ... once it has served its purpose it is dissolved" (Adelson, in Kvaraceus et al., 1965, p. 114). From this point of view, perhaps one should also view ethnicity as an identity amenable to re-definition, otherwise, aside from creating rigid social boundaries, it can limit our capacity for

situation-specific identification and become an obstacle to communication. It it only with critical self-awareness that we can aspire to "create a [pluralistic] society where there is difference without domination and affinity without identity" (Sarup, 1991, p. 68).

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