Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication is normally thought of as communication that takes place between members of whole cultures in contact or between their cultural spokespersons or representatives. Cross-cultural communication is distinguished from *intracultural communication,* which occurs between people sharing a common culture, and *intercultural communication,* which refers to exchanges in interpersonal settings between individuals from different cultures. William B. Gudykunst identifies both *intercultural communication* and *cross-cultural communication* as segments of *intergroup communication.*

When researchers want to compare or contrast the communication of people from different cultures and explain how communication varies from one culture to another, then a *cross-cultural communication* study occurs. William B. Gudykunst and Carmen M. Lee identify this type of research as among the several approaches for incorporating culture into communication theories. Such theorizing must link dimensions of cultural variability directly with the cultural norms and rules that influence the communication behavior being explained. It must avoid oversimplifying the process or inappropriately coupling the way that the cultural variables influence cultural norms and rules or the reverse. This kind of work is of interest to several academic fields, including anthropology, communication, international relations, psychology, and sociology, and has been applied to concepts such as attitudes, beliefs, cognition, cross-cultural business and training, journalism, language and linguistics, mass media, nonverbal cues, organizational culture, perceptions, stereotypes, thought-patterning, and values.

Theoretical Dimensions

Several sources of cultural variation have been investigated. These include (a) *power distance,* or the degree to which cultures include status and power hierarchies versus relative equality; (b) *individualism-collectivism,* or the extent to which cultures value individual personal identity versus community identity; (c) *self-construals,* or the ways that people see themselves; and (d) *low and high context,* or the degree to which a culture relies on unstated relational dynamics versus direct verbal communication.

A number of important theories have made use of these cross-cultural distinctions. Examples include Stella Ting-Toomey's 1985 *face negotiation theory,* which illustrates how communicators from different cultures manage varying practices of facework; Young Yun Kim's 1993 *conversational constraints theory,* which looks at how people from different cultures choose various strategies of communication; Judee Burgoon's 1978 *expectancy violations theory,* focusing on how communicators from different cultures respond when their expectations are violated; and William B. Gudykunst's 1995 *anxiety/ uncertainty management theory,* which focuses on how communicators reduce uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural situations. As another example, *communication accommodation theory,* attributed to Howard Giles and others, looks at the ways in which communicators accommodate various cultural practices in cross-cultural situations.

In addition, cross-cultural investigations could focus on a variety of other important variables. Michael H. Prosser in his 1978 book, *The Cultural Dialogue,* identified several problems that could guide this work. Among other things, it could investigate the role of conflict and conflict resolution, the ways in which communication is used for control and power, the impact of technology and especially information technology, cultural stability and cultural change, cultural imperialism, and cultural dependency or interdependency.

Steve J. Kulich recommends a nine-level analysis offering themes for cross-cultural research in which culture can be viewed in terms of (1) propagated mythic ideals; (2) mainstream promotion or mass trends; (3) model-citizen norms; (4) expected behavior mechanics; (5) integrated meshworks, which includes a set of real or imagined networks; (6) mediated metaphors; (7) mindless personal responses to familiarity; (8) personal matrix options, such as recognizing that binary theories at each extreme end of a spectrum must realize that instead some cultures are both traditional and modern at the same time; and (9) personalized meaning. In the context of social science research, Kulich proposes that an integrated grid can be developed in the cross-cultural study of communication that incorporates cultural, subcultural, contextual, and individual levels of culture. An integrated grid includes cultural socialization that is passed down vertically or horizontally within a culture; socially constructed perceptions within the context of cultural groups; and personally interpreted meanings, which include conceptual perceptions within social groups and reflective and relative meanings, leading to intercontextual studies. Kulich explains that at the cultural level, one needs to consider such issues as ideal myths, mass trends, and model citizen norms. At the subcultural or contextual level, he proposes that expected behavioral mechanics, integrated meshworks, and mediated metaphors need to be considered, and at the individual level, scholars need to interpret their own mindless responses, personal matrix options, and personalized meanings.

Illustrative Examples

An early longitudinal example of major cross-cultural research efforts includes Charles E. Osgood's **Cross-Cultural** *Universals of Affective Meaning Project,* designed to find nearly universal factors of meaning across approximately 50 cultures. In this multinational study, 100 teenaged boys in each culture were chosen to assess 100 terms for their understandings of *goodness* or *badness, power* or *lack of power,* and *swiftness* or *slowness.* This study tested and confirmed the hypotheses that regardless of language or culture, human beings use the same qualifying and descriptive framework in allocating affective meanings of concepts involving attitudes, feelings, stereotypes, and values.

Desmond Morris's study of middle-aged male usage of nonverbal gesture cues in 25 European cultures, described in his 1980 book *Gestures,* hypothesized and confirmed that middle-aged men living closer to the Mediterranean Sea, and already strongly fixed in their own national culture behaviors, would utilize far more exaggerated and bolder gestures than would those middle-aged men living in the northern European or Scandinavian countries. Also, the hypothesis that the former group would have more gestures with sexual implications than the northern European or Scandinavian cultures was generally confirmed. Later, in his 1994 book, *Bodytalk: A World Guide to Gestures,* more cross-cultural nonverbal studies were significantly explored in a much wider geographical range.

In the 9-day 1974 bicultural Japanese-American research conference in Nihonmatsu, Japan, the research team hypothesized that Japanese participants would be more task oriented and Americans would be more process oriented. Not surprisingly, it was found that the younger Japanese and American participants were more process oriented, while the older Japanese and Americans were more task oriented, thus disconfirming the hypothesis. Michael H. Prosser's book *The Cultural Dialogue* discusses this research conference, providing the essence of the bicultural dialogue that occurred there.

One of the most important cross-cultural studies of national attitudes and values was Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede's analysis of 116,000 responses. Based on this study, he initially proposed the development of four national cultural dimensions—*uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism versus collectivism,* and *masculinity versus femininity.* Michael Harris Bond added a fifth dimension in 1987 called *Confucian dynamism,* also known as *short-term versus long-term orientation.* Uncertainty avoidance specifies the level to which members of a national culture avoid or accept uncertainty; power distance is the extent to which less powerful

members of organizations and institutions accept unequal distributions of power. Masculinity versus femininity, more recently described as *aggressiveness versus nurturing,* emphasizes how a national culture manages its gender issues.

Individualism versus collectivism, initially proposed by cross-cultural psychologist Harry C. Triandis, focuses on whether members of a national culture are more oriented to *individual* versus *collective* or *communitarian values.* The Chinese Culture Connection in 1987 proposed that Hofstede's Western bias needs to be supplemented by a Chinese methodological bias of Confucianism. This cultural variability dimension has three aspects: *status relationships; integration,* or *harmony with others;* and *moral discipline.* In 2008, Hofstede added two new dimensions: *indulgence versus restraint* and *monumentalism versus flexumility* or *flexible humility.* These new dimensions have been articulated in his essay "Dimensionalizing Culture: Hofstede Model Context," in Steve J. Kulich and Michael H. Prosser's forthcoming coedited book **Cross-Cultural** *Value Studies,* and still need testing.

Western Versus Non-Western Cross-Cultural Problems

Many early cross-cultural studies focused on comparisons between American and Japanese, American and European, or American and Soviet cultural patterns. More recently, considerable research has emphasized contrasting cultural aspects of the Americans and Chinese or Chinese and other Westerners. Michael Harris Bond recommends that while these bicultural studies are useful, including those by cross-cultural psychologists, they use Western research methods to deal with indigenous cultural patterns. He urges cross-cultural researchers to move toward more pancultural studies, as Hofstede's studies have done, and that for serious reliability, at least 10 cultural groups are needed when standard social science statistical measurements are used.

CHANG, Hui-ching proposes that in building cross-cultural theory incorporating both Western and Asian ideologies, the central starting point for several Asian societies must be Confucianism. This requires the recognition that Asian cross-cultural theories about relationships, intimacy, interpersonal communication, and intercultural communication have Confucian roots. However, at the same time, Confucianism must be integrated with modern theories and must compete with both ancient and contemporary Western and other Asian theories. Her research program, leading to the potential construction of cross-cultural theories, first explored folk concepts leading to relationships developed in Chinese society and then showed how these relationships develop between the East and the West through cultural exchanges such as popular books, workshops, and seminars. Finally, she shows how these relationship ideals develop and expand microculturally through the ordinary language that Chinese use in their daily lives. Fundamentally, she believes that cross-cultural theory construction for a society such as China must concentrate on how the Chinese create these relationships through their modern daily use of language. Cross-cultural researchers in such a setting ideally should be bilingual, both in a Western language and in Chinese.

HWANG, Kwang-Kuo also argues that the development of social scientific cross-cultural research in the indigenous Asian setting is problematic because Western social science methods are not always appropriate to study indigenous Asian cultural factors. He believes that Western social science theories, or the *scientific microworld* versus the indigenous *Asian lifeworld* for intellectuals in non-Western countries, have serious limitations as the philosophy of science for constructing a scientific microworld is essentially a product of alien cultures inconsistent with practical Asian cultural traditions. Thus, a cross-cultural communication researcher must construct a tentative theory to solve scientific problems caused by inconsistencies between Western theories and the observed phenomena or results of experiments in more traditional Asian societies, contradictions within a system or theory, and conflicts between the two types of theories. For example, formal justice in Western scientific cross-cultural studies includes such basic elements as authority in an unequal relationship but does not practically consider the notion of Confucian respect for the superior in determining what is just.

Referring to cross-cultural communication studies for Chinese scholars as illustrative, GUAN, Shije notes several problems for China, and by implication for other Asian cultures: (a) More dialectical research is conducted than empirical studies; (b) too much research is conducted in individual disciplines rather than on an interdisciplinary basis; (c) more general introductions are provided than on specific topics with Chinese characteristics; (d) more Sino-U.S. research is done than comparisons of China with other countries; and (e) more international studies than domestic cross-cultural research are done of different Chinese communities in the mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and in the Chinese diaspora. He argues that this singularity of research methodology and focus has been a bottleneck in restraining further in-depth cross-cultural Chinese and Asian communication research.

Summary

It is impossible to completely separate the theoretical study of intercultural and cross-cultural communication. Gudykunst notes that before the late 1970s, when he began his doctoral studies, there were few, if any, reliable and valid theories for the study of either type of communication. As the study of intercultural and cross-cultural theories has matured, many new actual theories have been developed, tested, and confirmed or disconfirmed. Still more cross-cultural theories will develop over time that can be tested in a reliable and valid manner. New social science statistical measurements can help researchers hypothesize and test these theories, adding to the mature development of cross-cultural theoretical constructs.

—Michael H. Prosser

Further Readings

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