



Problematizing Intercultural Competence in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

A deeper understanding of intercultural communication has long been intertwined with international education efforts and internationalization strategies. Historically, intercultural competence has been grounded in a framework in which culture is reduced to a variable used interchangeably with the nation-state. Recently, intercultural competence has been encouraged through interventions in what has been described as a social constructivist paradigm. In this model, knowledge is construction through reflection. While both models are used in higher education programming, what happens when working with students who do not identify with the nation-state or whose conceptualization of knowledge is centered in relationships and community?

PARADIGMATIC FLOW



INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR WHOM?

Higher Education and Intercultural Learning

Internationalization of higher education was born of the rise of globalization and the nation-state’s efforts to be successful and relevant in a globalized community (De wit 2002).

Intercultural competence encourages students to develop communication skills to more successfully engage in a global world with diverse work styles, values and belief systems (Deardorff, 2006).

What of students who encounter intercultural difference everyday, who are citizens of their nation but inhabit it as “others”?

Native communities in the United States are not sojourners from a different country, their presence predates the creation of the U.S. Through settler-colonialism, reservations and assimilation tactics were used towards erasure.

Complicating Competence

Due to the dominance of the field by Western scholars, many articles are written from a perspective of trying to understand the “other” in which the “other” represents cultures found in Asia, Africa and Latin America or non-dominant populations found in the West, such as Native American or African American communities.

Critical questions to be applied to competence:

- How is competence being defined?
- How is culture being defined?
- Who gets to decide and who is benefiting from gaining “competence”?

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POST POSITIVIST PARADIGM

Culture is viewed through nation-state framework with specific behavior and beliefs attached and the study of culture is used as tool to predict and manage behavior.

Culture is viewed as a variable affecting the communication process that can be measured, tested and then ultimately predicted (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003).

Studying intercultural communication is practical in nature, improving successful communication in the face of global and domestic diversity in the workplace and also for interpersonal development (Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Methodology reflects understanding of culture as a measurable variable, quantitative in nature.

Statistical data collection and analysis are representative of academic rigor and objectivity is sought after by researchers.

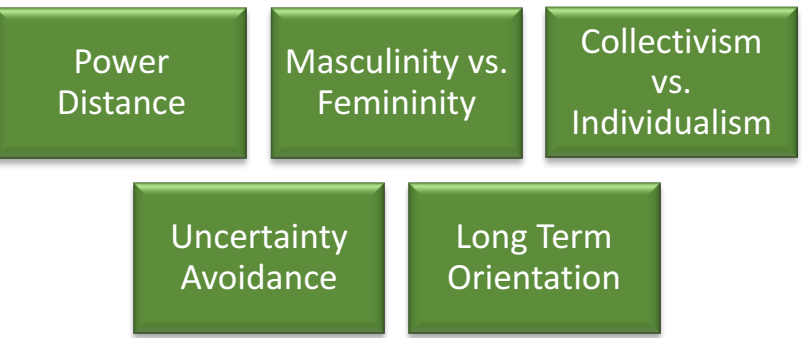
Scholars:

- **Hofstede: Dimensions of Culture**
Examined a specific corporate environment, focusing on national culture as the only variable.
- **Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey:** Uncertainty and Face
- **GLOBE: Quantitative Data:** a large-scale research project spanning ten years, grounded in empirical methods, and resulting in nine attributes of culture
- **Trompenaars: 5 Dimensions**

Conclusions:

Brought the study of culture and communication to a wider audience and spread across disciplines including education, organizational management and business. This popularity also normalized the attributes of culture purported by these researchers.

The focus on Nation-State can silence the diversity of experience within its boundaries, making it difficult for a person to demonstrate behavior contrary to what is categorized or have it be recognized as behavior rooted in cultural values.



SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST PARADIGM

In the constructivist paradigm, reality is constructed from an individual’s lived experiences, thus culture cannot be considered a static variable or reified as found in the post-positivist/functionalist paradigm (M. J. Bennett, 2012).

This element of self-awareness is a key component, important to create learning interventions to engage students in critical reflection on experiences to create knowledge.

Competence requires more than just cognitive knowledge, also incorporates elements of behavior and affectation

Methodology is still somewhat quantitative but with qualitative elements (inventory).

Scholars:

- **Bennett, M:** Development Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, Bennett (1996)
Moving from an Ethnocentric to Ethnorelative Mindset



- **Bennett, J**
- **Hammer:** Intercultural Development Inventory
- **Van der Berg**

Conclusions:

Challenges the post-positivist tradition and the reification of culture and acknowledges different lived experiences of those that inhabit the world

Does not fully acknowledge the unseen or unsanctioned systems that affect how people move in the world as necessary to better understand intercultural communication.

Focus is inward, on an individual’s ability to more successfully communicate with individuals in an increasingly global world; very little focus on community or outward focus on relational aspects of communication

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The positioning of the Western gaze as normative also illustrates the flow of intercultural communication research in which non-Western cultures are positioned as needing to be understood but do not offer knowledge or insight.

The movement of people across borders, the interaction between diverse countries and communities and the agency of decision-making further disrupt the traditional model of culture as nation. Culture cannot be static in this state of globalization.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the population of American Indian and Alaska Native students enrolled in higher education in the U.S. has more than doubled in the past 30 years. An increasing number of Native students will encounter intercultural communication competency outcomes during their time in university or college.

Moving Forward

As Bennett notes, there is often paradigmatic confusion found between programming outcomes and the epistemological assumptions on which it is created. Frameworks or dimensions identified and studied in the post-positivist and constructivist paradigms may have international researchers or internationally validated datasets, but they are still rooted in the Western/European gaze.

A first step is re-examining the grounding of the models and datasets used to articulate intercultural competence as well as identifying for what purpose is intercultural competence being encouraged. Create space for deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge and conceptualizations that continue to challenge the nation-state and community-based understanding of the world

CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Acknowledges the importance of history as an element of intercultural communication and the affects of power structures, creates the space to encourage an Indigenous perspective that challenges the Western and Eurocentric normative-based conception of intercultural communication and competence.

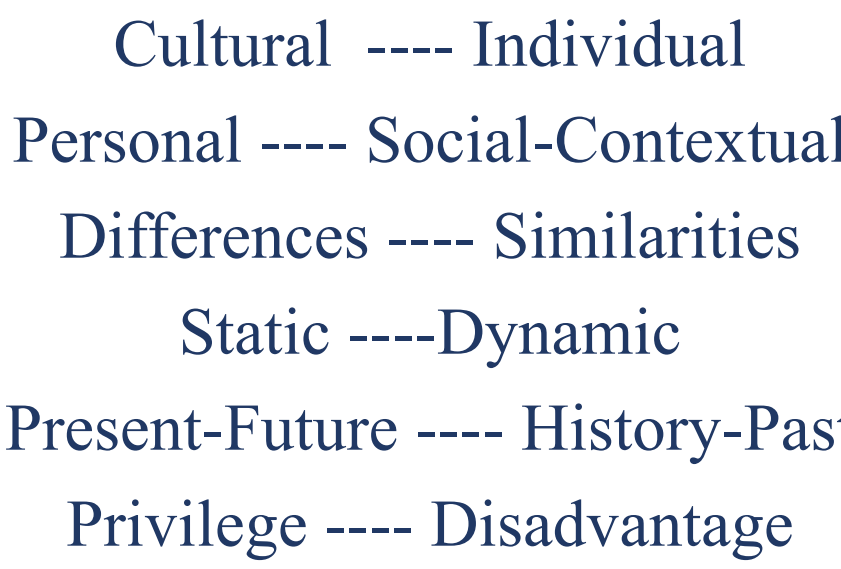
Paradigm challenges normative understandings of identity, power and nation (Asante, Miike, and Yin, 2008).

Methodology is grounded in qualitative research with emphasis on critical methods such as discourse analysis, ethnography and the incorporation of Indigenous methods

Share the belief that culture is socially constructed by the individual through experience and interactions with others, but also note “that human behavior is always constrained by societal ideological superstructures and materials conditions that privilege some and advantage others” (Martin, Nakayama, & Carbaugh, 2012, p 28).

Scholars:

- **Halualani, R. T.**
- **Asante & Miike**
- **Martin, Nakayama, Flores:** Intercultural Communication Dialectics (2002)



Conclusions:

The literature of critical intercultural communication encourages action through questions, to examine issues of power and identity and be “attentive to issues of social justice” (Collier et al., 2002, p. 223)

Still developing as a paradigmatic perspective; critical theory is not as common in the intercultural communication field for practitioners

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