

Approaching Intercultural Communication

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

This chapter will enable you to:

- Start thinking about intercultural communication in terms of one central research question: Who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes?
- Familiarise yourself with the terms cross-cultural communication, intercultural communication and inter-discourse communication, and identify how the terms are used with different, similar or overlapping meanings in different studies.
- Analyse culture-related texts for the uses, content, scope and status of culture.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: WHAT IS IT?

‘Intercultural communication’ is one of those terms that everybody uses, and in many different and not necessarily compatible ways. Instead of starting with a definition, I will start with a description of three studies that come under the heading ‘intercultural communication’, and I will ask you to work out for yourself how the researchers who conducted and wrote these studies understand ‘intercultural communication’.

Study 1 is an investigation of the ways in which British and Italian service staff of an airline respond to service failure (Lorenzoni and Lewis 2004). Service failure is another term for ‘when something goes wrong’ such as baggage being lost or a customer not being able to get on their flight due to overbooking. The researchers administered a questionnaire to thirty-

seven British and thirty-nine Italian ground, telephone and cabin staff who worked for the same airline. Both British and Italian staff were very similar in their 'behavioural responses', that is, they reported that they would respond similarly to service failure. For instance, most participants claimed that they would try to change an arrangement if doing so was within company regulations. If it was impossible to change an arrangement, they indicated on the questionnaire that they would explain to the customer why this was so.

While British and Italian employees said they would behave in similar ways in response to a service failure, the two groups reported different attitudes towards customers affected by service failure. For example, Italian service staff reported that they sometimes bent the rules a bit for 'compassionate cases' but British workers did not.

In terms of intercultural communication, the researchers explain the similarities they found in the way the workers act as resulting from the same training that all employees of the airline receive, irrespective of where they are based; and they explain the differences they found in the workers' attitudes as resulting from British and Italian culture, and conclude that attitudes are more influenced by culture and not as amenable to training as behaviour.

Study 2 is concerned with the ways in which Korean immigrant shopkeepers in Los Angeles interact with their African-American customers (Bailey 2000). The researcher observed these interactions by visiting a number of retail shops owned by Korean immigrants. He installed a video camera in one such shop and recorded all interactions during a four-hour period, and he also interviewed the shopkeepers and customers. The researcher found that service encounters with Korean customers were very straightforward, and usually contained three communicative activities – greeting, business transaction, closing – as in this example between a Korean shopkeeper and a Korean customer.¹

Customer: [enters store]
Cashier: Hello.
Customer: Hello. Cigarettes!
Cashier: You would like cigarettes? [reaches for cigarettes under counter] Here you are. [takes customer's money and hands her cigarettes]
Customer: [turns to leave]
Cashier: Good-bye.
Customer: Okay.

By contrast, interactions with African-American customers were more complex because these customers initiated additional communicative

activities such as small talk about the weather, jokes about current affairs, or personal talk about their jobs and families. The Korean storekeepers never proactively introduced such additional communicative activities, they rarely reciprocated and often they did not even respond to such attempts at making the encounter more personal. When the researcher interviewed African-American customers about their views on these retail encounters, it emerged that they often felt ignored by the Korean shopkeepers and complained about their lack of involvement. Furthermore, they felt that this lack of involvement was due to racist attitudes on the part of Korean shopkeepers. By contrast, Korean shop-owners and cashiers considered their customers' attempts at personalising the encounter an imposition and a sign of bad manners, which they attributed to lack of education (or lack of 'good breeding', as they called it) on the part of the African Americans.

Even after years of doing business in African-American neighbourhoods and after years of shopping in Korean convenience stores, intercultural communication between shopkeepers and customers did not improve and they failed to accommodate to each other's ways of speaking. The researcher explains the persistence of divergent communicative styles with reference to the wider socio-historical context in which the two groups interact: there is a long history of racial tensions between immigrant shopkeepers and African Americans in some low-income Los Angeles neighbourhoods and against this background each interaction is turned into a new micro-enactment of prior conflicts.

Study 3 is concerned with the ways in which people who live in tourist destinations are being represented in travel writing (Galasiński and Jaworski 2003). The researchers collected travel narratives published in the travel section of a British broadsheet newspaper. They found that travel journalists used three distinct strategies to describe people who live in tourist destinations: to begin with, those people are referred to in very general terms, either as 'locals', as members of a national or ethnic group (for example, 'Russians', 'Dominicans'), or as members of a broad social group (for example, 'women', 'children'). These groups are then described as homogeneous and with clearly identifiable attributes; for example, 'Madeirans being a modest, undemonstrative, devoutly Catholic people.' A second strategy of representing people in tourist destinations was to single out one or more prototypical representatives that the journalist has observed or, more rarely, interacted with. In a story about a trip to China, for instance, a beggar was singled out for such an individual description: 'A beggar in cotton shoes, black felt hat and padded coat, approaches me. Suddenly, he pulls back his coat to reveal a right arm that is no more than a fingered flipper attached to the shoulder.' A third strategy was to

represent people in tourist destinations as ‘helpers’ to the tourist, most typically as ‘hospitable locals’. An example comes from a story about a trip to Italy: ‘I travelled alone and met nothing but courtesy and warmth.’ The researchers conclude that these representational strategies are part of turning a place into a tourist destination: not a place where real people, part of a complex society, lead their lives, but rather a place where people are specimens of a particular culture and where it is safe for the tourist to go and gaze at people as a tourist attraction.

These three studies are concerned with intercultural communication in three mundane contexts: service work, convenience shopping and reading the newspaper. Their everyday character brings the ubiquity of intercultural communication home to us. They remind us that, yes, intercultural communication is mundane and ubiquitous but, read together, they also raise the question of what ‘intercultural communication’ actually is. Obviously, the three studies are concerned with quite different objects of enquiry and are based on different understandings of intercultural communication. Study 1 compares the attitudes and communicative behaviours of service workers from different ‘cultural’ backgrounds, where ‘culture’ is understood as identical to nation (‘British’ and ‘Italian’). Study 2 studies shopkeepers and customers from different cultural backgrounds in interaction, and ‘culture’ is seen as similar to ethnicity and/or race (‘Korean immigrants’ and ‘African Americans’). Study 3 investigates how other people are talked about and cultural belonging is discursively constructed. Here culture is seen as a product of the text instead of a social variable.

These three distinct understandings of intercultural communication have been termed as ‘cross-cultural communication’, ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘inter-discourse communication’, respectively (Scollon, Scollon and Jones 2012). Studies in ‘cross-cultural communication’ start from an assumption of distinct cultural groups and investigate aspects of their communicative practices comparatively. Studies in ‘intercultural communication’ mostly also start from an assumption of cultural differences between distinct cultural groups but study their communicative practices in interaction with each other. Finally, the ‘inter-discourse approach’ avoids any a priori notions of cultural identity. Instead, this approach asks how culture is made relevant in a text or interaction and how cultural identity is brought into existence through text and talk.

When you start reading in the field of intercultural communication it is useful to clarify for yourself whether a given piece of research is contrastive, interactive or discursive but you are likely to find that the terms ‘cross-cultural communication’, ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘inter-discourse communication’ are not always neatly applied by writers. In this book, when I report on the work of other researchers I will use

their own terms but will state how their usage relates to that of Scollon et al. (2012) where necessary. When distinctions between the three traditions are unnecessary and I am referring to the field as a whole I will use 'intercultural communication' as an umbrella term.

However, irrespective of the term being used, this book also puts forward an argument as to the relative merit of the three traditions. My argument is that, for intercultural communication studies to be meaningful in an increasingly interconnected world, to be sound research and to be socially relevant, they need to eschew a priori definitions of culture. A priori assumptions about 'culture' are clearly absent from studies in the inter-discourse tradition, and also from many studies in the intercultural communication tradition. Therefore, as part of that argument I prefer the term 'intercultural communication' because it is more likely to be used in studies of communication in which culture, and particularly cultural difference, is made relevant by and to the participants. That means that culture should not be considered as something that people have but something that is created and recreated through text and talk.

It will have become clear by now that 'culture' is another problematic term and that we need to explore the ways in which it is used before we can hope to understand intercultural communication, and it is therefore to conceptualisations of culture that I will now turn.

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. (R. Williams 1983: 87)

In a book originally published in 1952, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) collected 156 definitions of the term 'culture'. More than six decades have passed and during this time a new academic field, cultural studies, has burgeoned and interest in and debates around culture have increased considerably. If one were to undertake a similar list today, the number of entries would surely have increased significantly. So, no single definition of 'culture' exists and the term means many things to many people. As a consequence, the exploration of how 'culture' is used by specific people for specific purposes in a specific context is a key task of intercultural communication research. Let's consider the following three examples and try to find out what the underlying understanding of 'culture' is.

Example 1 deals with the 'culture' entries on three national .com sites. National .com sites are marketing tools, typically geared towards tourism but also aiming at overseas business investors. They provide

country-specific news and are part of the branding of a country. The institutional links to government seem to be limited but are ultimately unclear for all the three websites I have chosen: China, Ecuador and Russia. All three sites have a link to 'culture' on their home page.²

The culture page on China.com features a list of blog posts about topics such as 'Chinese Calligraphy', 'Beijing Roast Duck', 'Chinese Cloth Shoes', 'Traditional Chinese Dress Cheongsam' or 'Dragon Boat Festival'. An image of a table laden with food also features prominently on the page. By contrast, the culture page of Ecuador.com consists of a text page headed 'Unlock the Treasures of Ecuadorian Culture.' The text, which is only around 300 words in length, takes the reader on a quick spin through 'Ecuador's official language', 'music and dance festivals', 'Ecuadorians' distinctive dress code', 'cuisine' and 'Christmas in Ecuador'. Finally, the culture page on Russia.com is dominated by an image of three smiling women in traditional dress reaching out to the viewer with a plate of pancakes in a gesture of offering. The headline tells the reader that 'Russia has a long and rich history.' The page then offers 'some basic understanding of Russian culture' through links to four 'stories' about 'Russian traditions', 'Russian mentality', 'Russian irrational beliefs' and 'Holidays in Russia'.

Example 2 considers 'culture' in business travel advisories. In addition to practical advice and assistance, such sites often also provide some 'cultural advice'. They usually present the 'culture' of travel destinations as one 'risk' that business travellers and their employers need to manage, along with health or safety risks. An example comes from the site www.riskconversation.com,³ which is operated by the UK-headquartered and US-owned multinational insurance provider Chubb. The site recommends 'cultural sensitivity training' for business travellers so that they can learn cultural 'dos and don'ts' and improve their 'cultural IQ'. The following examples are provided to show what a 'cultural IQ' might look like:

- In Brazil, locals thrive on meaningful interpersonal relationships. If, upon greeting your business partner, you immediately 'get down to business', most likely you have offended – and even lost – your host or local counterpart.
- Similarly, making comments in the Middle East about women's rights or telling jokes about an ethnic group may result in 'bad blood' between you and your client.
- Not removing your shoes when entering a business associate's home in India or China may result in a loss of confidence in your abilities and reputation – right from the get-go.

Example 3 comes from news reports about an international gay and lesbian conference, which was banned in Ghana in 2006 (Forji 2006; 'Ghanaian

Gay Conference Banned' 2006). Part of the ban issued by the Ghanaian government read as follows:

Ghanaians are unique people whose culture, morality and heritage totally abhor homosexual and lesbian practices and indeed any other form of unnatural sexual acts. [. . .] The government does not condone any such activity which violently offends the culture, morality and heritage of the entire people of Ghana.

These three examples relate to uses of 'culture' in three contexts where culture is oftentimes invoked in today's world: Example 1 comes from the context of tourism marketing, and country marketing more generally, where 'culture' is part of a country's assets. Example 2 is from the world of international business travel, where 'cultural difference' is one aspect of the challenges and difficulties that international companies and their employees might need to manage. Example 3 relates a governmental decision and thus belongs to the sphere of state control, where 'culture' is invoked in relation to citizenship. That means that a hegemonic notion of 'Ghanaian culture' is used to deny some members of society equal rights to those of the majority. While 'culture' is used to disenfranchise gays and lesbians in the example case, 'culture' is also often invoked against the equal rights of immigrants, indigenous minorities, religious minorities or women.

My initial focus on the uses of 'culture' in these examples is intended to set the tone for the rest of this book: as I said above, I regard it as the fundamental research question of the field of intercultural communication to ask who makes culture relevant to whom in which context for which purposes. However, the three examples are also instructive in relation to other definitional issues, namely content, scope and status.

Let's start with content: What is it that 'culture' comprises in the three examples? 'Culture as a national asset' is linked to what often has been called 'high culture': history, the arts and festivals. At the same time, there is also 'popular culture' such as folklore, belief systems and particularly cuisine. 'Culture as challenge' is mostly about interpersonal relationships and how these are communicated verbally (for instance, through engaging in or avoiding small talk) and non-verbally (for instance, through removing or not removing outside shoes when entering a home). Finally, 'culture as citizenship' is presented as consisting of practices that are widely seen as signifying a particular identity: sexual practices in our example. Other such practices which have widely been linked to 'culture' as a basis for discrimination are dress codes (think of debates surrounding the Muslim hijab) or ways of speaking (think of the endless debates about some

immigrant group or other not learning 'our' language or not integrating into 'our' society in other ways).

These various contents of 'culture' include some people and exclude others: in Example 3, it is obvious that gay and lesbian people are being excluded from any claim to 'Ghanaian culture'. The exclusionary character of a 'high culture' understanding is also fairly obvious: if 'culture' is thought to reside in museums, theatres, concert halls and the like, it is limited to people who have the means to access these, that is the middle and upper classes who have the education to appreciate this kind of 'culture' and the financial means to do so. The exclusionary character of culture as interpersonal relationships may be less obvious at first glance. However, on closer inspection, it is embedded in the homogenising nature of statements such as those offered in Example 2: the advice to not mention women's rights in the Middle East, for instance, imagines the Middle Eastern interlocutor as male and, more specifically, as a misogynist male who is incapable of rationally discussing women's rights without his 'bad blood' being made to boil.

The exclusionary character of aspects of the content definition of culture brings me to the third definitional aspect, scope, because exclusion and inclusion – the identity work that 'culture' does – become apparent only relative to the scope of a definition of culture.

At first sight, it might seem that these diverse aspects of 'culture' – culled as they are from such a limited set of data – do not have much in common. But look more closely and they actually do: all three of them take the nation as the basic unit of culture. The scope of each underlying understanding of culture, that is, the cultural unit, is a nation in each example (with the exception of the Middle East, where a region is treated as a nation-like homogeneous unit). This is hardly surprising in any of the examples: in Example 1, the national .com websites are explicitly about a nation so obviously the nation would be the unit to which culture applies. Only if you consult corporate websites for contrast does the ubiquity of 'culture' on the nation .com sites become striking: 'culture' is a key aspect of marketing a nation, but it is a rare aspect of marketing any other entity from advertising agencies to zoos. The cultural tips in Example 2 also relate to countries. Again, this may seem 'natural' at first glance because international travel is typically conceived of as travel involving a country of origin and a destination country. However, on second sight, a country – and even more so a region such as the Middle East – is not a good unit when it comes to risk assessment because every country is large, complex and diverse. In the same way that security threats may differ from one part of a country to another, between urban and rural areas, or even across venues in one and the same neighbourhood, behavioural norms are not uniform

across a country. Example 3, coming as it does from a state act, also invokes the culture of the nation as unit. Taking the nation or another large group based on social variables (for example, ethnicity or religion) as the unit of analysis in much of the intercultural communication literature is inevitably simplistic and has a number of theoretical and practical consequences, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Last but not least, the status of 'culture' in all three examples is that of an entity and the existence of that entity is presupposed. When we encounter definite noun phrases such as 'Ecuadorian culture' or 'Russian mentality', we do not usually stop to think, 'Hey, wait a minute! Does such a thing as "Ecuadorian culture" or "Russian mentality" really exist?' This is because definite noun phrases such as this trigger a presupposition of existence. A presupposition is a proposition that remains constant under negation. For instance, Russia.com advises readers that it is a 'good idea to get some basic understanding of Russian culture before your visit'. You may disagree with that and negate the statement ('Getting some basic understanding of Russian culture before your visit is *not* a good idea.'). However, your critical effort in negating the overall statement does not go very far because it does not call into question the existence of 'Russian culture' (nor 'your visit', incidentally) because the status of 'Russian culture' as a real entity remains presupposed.

We would arrive at a different understanding of the status of 'culture' if we treated it as a verb: 'to do culture', or, more specifically, 'to do Chinese, Ecuadorian, Ghanaian or Russian culture'. Brian Street, an anthropologist of education, argued in a famous essay that 'culture is a verb' because 'culture is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition, including its own definition' (1993: 25).

If we treat culture as something people do, then its status changes from an entity to a process. The entity understanding of culture is essentialist: it treats culture as something people have or to which they belong. The process view of culture is constructionist: it treats culture as something people do, which they perform, and, crucially, compete over. These two understandings of the status of culture can both be found in the intercultural communication literature. Intercultural communication studies are a truly multidisciplinary undertaking and a university course on intercultural communication might be offered under the umbrella of any (or all) of the following disciplines, and probably some other ones, too: anthropology, business studies, communication, cultural studies, education, linguistics, management studies, languages, psychology or sociology. However, multidisciplinary does not mean interdisciplinary, and there is not necessarily much actual interaction – or should I call it 'intercultural communication'? – going on between the various stakeholders. One of the obstacles

to a productive dialogue is precisely these two fundamentally incompatible understandings of the status of culture. The product understanding is best epitomised in the work of Geert Hofstede, who considers culture to be ‘the software of the mind [. . .] our mental programming’ (Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov 2010). Hofstede has inspired an immense body of work in cross-cultural communication, and I will return to this work in more detail in Chapter 7.

By contrast, the view of culture espoused here and grounded in the anthropological and sociological traditions is that ‘culture is not a real thing, but an abstract and purely analytical notion. It does not cause behaviour, but summarises an abstraction from it, and is thus neither normative nor predictive’ (Baumann 1996: 11).

In sum, culture has many different meanings and is used in many different ways, which differ along the dimensions of use, content, scope and status. In this section, I have laid out the issues and illustrated them on the basis of three everyday examples. However, these different understandings of culture also have theoretical and practical consequences for research in intercultural communication, and these will be further explored throughout this book.

KEY POINTS

This chapter made the following key points:

- Culture is not something that exists outside of and precedes intercultural communication. Instead, intercultural communication is one domain where ‘culture’ as concerned with the specific – and different – ways of life of different national and ethnic groups is constructed.
- Culture is an ideological construct called into play by social actors to produce and reproduce social categories and boundaries, and it must be the central research aim of a critical approach to intercultural communication to understand the reasons, forms and consequences of calling cultural difference into play.

COUNTERPOINT

While culture is not something we have – a trait – but something we do – a performance – it is also something that is done to us when others perceive us and treat us as representatives of a particular culture. Being ascribed a particular culture may, for all intents and purposes, be the same

as ‘having’ a culture. Does that mean the essentialist and the constructionist view of culture are ultimately the same? Where do they differ? You may wish to reflect on this question on the basis of your own experience: How do you have culture(s)? How do you do culture(s)? How is/are culture(s) done to you?

FURTHER READING

Scollon et al. (2012) provide an overview of the implications of the three approaches to intercultural communication – as cross-cultural communication, as intercultural communication and as inter-discourse communication – for research in the field. Sarangi (2009) offers a concise yet comprehensive overview of approaches to culture from the perspective of intercultural communication. Blommaert (2005) is a good introduction to the critical and ethnographic tradition in discourse analysis.

ACTIVITIES

Cross-cultural, intercultural or inter-discourse communication?

Look up one or more of the following studies and identify the underlying definition of intercultural communication. If the study treats culture as given, also identify the underlying definition of culture.

- Communicating a credible narrative in asylum interviews (Smith-Khan 2017).
- Communicating suspects’ rights in interpreted police interviews (Nakane 2007a).
- Discussing depression in a migrant context (Tilbury 2007).
- Joking in Australian English (Goddard 2009).
- Making sense of study abroad experiences (Tusting, Crawshaw and Callen 2002).
- Representations of indigenous people on postcards (Thurlow, Jaworski and Ylänne-McEwen 2005).
- Soft-skilling cultural difference in the Canadian labour market (Allan 2016).

Everyday intercultural communication: reflect on your own experience

Individually or as a class blog, keep a journal throughout the duration of your course about any texts – public or private, spoken, written or computer-mediated – you come across or any interactions you are involved in

where culture is made relevant. To make your notes systematic, you can use a grid which identifies the following aspects of each observation:

- Who is talking? Is the speaker or writer an identifiable individual or an institution? In which role do they speak or write?
- Who is the intended audience? Are there any overhearers? In case of an interaction, what are their reactions?
- What is the relevant context? For example, the relationship between the interactants, the time and place, the medium.
- What is the form? Record what was said or written as accurately as possible and consider the content, scope and status of culture.
- What is the purpose of bringing up culture?

NOTES

1. The transcript has been adapted from Bailey (2000: 94) and the interaction was originally conducted in Korean.
2. See <http://english.china.com/chinese/culture/index.html>; <http://www.ecuador.com/culture/>; and <http://russia.com/interest/culture/>. All URLs provided in this book were last accessed on 2 January 2017.
3. See <http://riskconversation.com/blog/business/2014/10/14/cultural-sensitivity-training-for-business-travelers/>