Introduction

This paper explores some of the many issues surrounding research into intercultural communication. The complex process of intercultural interaction has in the past been analysed in Western society as a one-way adaptation and integration of the stranger into a host society (Kim 1988). Such research assumes a static host society with a regulated system of socialisation (Gudykunst 1983a). In the postmodern world, concepts of adaptation, or integration, or even multiculturalism have been strongly challenged. This paper tries to place some of those challenges in perspective.

Early narratives, or travellers tales, presented vivid descriptions of groups of peoples recognising that they, like us, had intriguing differences in lifestyles. However, by the eighteenth century these tales became a mechanism for legitimating conquest and the stories expunged the humanness of colonised people (Pratt 1992). By the nineteenth century anthropological research epitomised Eurocentric interpretations of the Other, making much of the contrasts between two supposed opposites.

With the challenge of postmodernism, researchers have seemingly rejected the notion of fundamental norms and values, or generalisable interests, and expanded on a view that nothing is definable, that there are multiple voices, and that diversity is to be celebrated. It has been claimed that no authentic communication is possible across cultures, particularly where the communicators come from diametrically different cultural backgrounds.

Other researchers have leaned towards Jürgen Habermas' communicative
action theory to seek explanations for communicative interactions (Young 1990, 1992; Fox 1992). But the theory fails to take into account some of the key issues in theorising about authentic intercultural communication (Fox 1992).

In the following discussion, I try to make a case that authenticity in communication across cultures is not only possible, it is imperative. An authentic communicative situation is an honourable kind of conversation based on mutual trust and a respectful sharing of intended meanings. It requires a sense of resonance between those who seek to reach agreement and understanding, whether it be intuitively, or poetically, or by identifying shared moral values experientially, or through rational discourse, or a bit of each.

Compatibility or incompatibility in intercultural communication

David Corson (Corson, in press) puts forward the argument that it is inevitable that some cultural realities are incompatible. He argues that different cultural values about social interaction will be expressed in conceptual frameworks which are radically different from Western individualistic conceptual frameworks. In his experience, he says, where discourse norms and strategies are very different, most people are not well equipped to mediate, in complex matters, between these two worldviews.

Corson's perspective seems to reinforce the postmodernist idea of the untranslatability of different experiences. It is contended that, unless minority groups resist the constant socialisation pressures from more powerful groups, they will be in danger of losing some very important and worthwhile cultural norms. Corson himself believes that many people who live as minorities in particular contexts, such as Maoris in New Zealand, or Aborigines in Australia, have to become truly bilingual and bicultural "in order to lead tolerable lives". He goes on to say that "the act of becoming truly bilingual and bicultural is a rare enough achievement for people. But even these achievements may not be enough to make real intercultural communication between peoples possible" (Corson, in press).

It is my contention that widely differing values within one culture are not dependent on differences in perceived cultural identity. For example, within the United States, those who favour capital punishment as a way of dealing with people classified as social deviants hold incompatible views from those who do not agree with state sanctioned killing in any form. The discourse norms of these opposing groups are probably very similar. The politics of difference will become part of the dialogue, however, should the person espousing capital punishment be white Anglo-saxon, and the person espousing reform be black African American. The position of the dominant person may be a claim to moral
superiority over what he sees as the deviant minority, while the position of the marginalised person may be a claim of oppression and victimisation since the majority on death row are black.

Why should it be assumed that groups of people who identify themselves as of a different race, ethnic or cultural group, and whose discourse norms are different, cannot successfully communicate? To put the question in another way, are there really such separate discourse norms for social interaction that cultural boundaries cannot be bridged? My answer to this is no, and that cultural boundaries can be bridged on every important issue if there are compatible moral values. The disastrous consequences of failing to find compatibility between values and goals of groups of people has seen whole nations and ethnic groups oppose each other with violence and hatred.

This marginalising of the Other stems from erroneous assumptions based on stereotyping of culture and language less known to a European, and of racist attitudes of superiority over others (Said 1978, 1983, 1993; Spivak 1990). Just as feminist critiques of a supposed dichotomy between the public sphere and the private sphere show up a gender blindness, so do I critique any supposed dichotomy between Western and Third World as culture blindness.

The historical record shows that the web of ignorance and apparent incompatibility can, over time, become untangled and eventually understood. The illusion is not that intercultural communication exists, but that the construction of an embodied identity creates a barrier. Attitudes change. New language is created. New metaphors develop to translate new meanings more adequately. There are indeed ways of discovering how people can filter meaning through their own cultural worldviews in order to "get into" as Corson says, another worldview. As Homi Bhabha says:

An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. .. The stereotype...is its major discursive strategy (Bhabha 1994, p.66).

John Thompson's classification of these ways of operating in the construction of "other" include: the legitimation of the current relations of domination; the dissimulation or concealment of this domination; a unification process which embraces powerful individuals in a collective identity; the fragmentation of the various non-dominant groups of "other"; or the reification of the unequal state of affairs as if it were permanent, natural and outside of time.
The illusion of incompatibility is therefore related more to politics and power than to a genuine attempt to look at the dynamics of intercultural communication.

**Miscommunication vs distorted communication**

If authentic intercultural communication is the result of successfully interacting, there are two other layers of attempted intercultural communication—miscommunication and systemically distorted communication. The layers are not in linear progression, but are potentially overlays of the same speech event. The difference is between finding the right path, taking a wrong turn, and being pushed off a cliff. To mix metaphors, intercultural communication can very easily "misfire" in Austin's (1962) terms. This is miscommunication, or taking a wrong turn. Miscommunication is sometimes simply a miscoding of language where a second language speaker is attempting to communicate an idea to a native speaker through "interlanguage" (Tarone et al. 1988).

The third layer occurs where the interlocutors take an ideological position on their relationship with each other and one represents power over the other. This is like being pushed over a cliff—an irretrievable breakdown in authentic communication. Such a failure to involve each other without coercion indicates a systemic distortion.

It is my view that it is the value position of the interlocutors, not their class, gender, ethnicity or physical attributes per se which determines the success of the communication. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the potential for socially constructed inequalities, and culturally constructed differences to distort or prevent even a first attempt at engagement. Nor does it assume that those who see themselves as marginalised in any way should be obliged to adapt to a dominant position. Authentic communication is not culture blind but culture sensitive.

An example of how the layers of miscommunication and distortion can be interpreted is given by Christopher Lane (1988). He looked at a New Zealand courtroom scene between English-speaking (Anglo New Zealand) lawyers and Polynesian witnesses. He maintained that there were certain linguistic “triggers” precipitating miscommunication, chief among them the witnesses’ responses to repetitive questioning sequences. The following illustrates a case of apparent misinterpretation of the cues of a second language speaker regarding correct yes/no responses (Lane 1988, p.74).

Q. Do you know if Paulo is related to the defendant?
A. Yes
Q. Do you mean that Paulo is related to him?
A. No
Q. The Paulo is not related to him?
A. Yes
Q. Is Paulo related to the defendant?
A. No

There are two interpretations of this exchange. One is that the witness was being sincere and truthful within his own understanding of the situation. Another is that the witness was being evasive, unclear, unreliable and inconsistent. The latter interpretation is an indication of a systemic distortion in communication. If there was no assumption of dominant/oppressed positions, such a claim would not be made. Thus, the interpretation of the same speech event is reliant on the specific context, and the ideological assumptions of the reader and the participants. There is no way that the miscommunication can be repaired while this distortion remains. The ability to make a distinction between miscommunication and distorted communication is thus particularly problematic for a researcher of intercultural situations.

Sociolinguistic and ethical-political indicators of distortions

Distortions might come about intentionally or unintentionally. The language of racism is usually carried out knowingly, backed by the full weight of structural discrimination in law and society. Sometimes, however, people engage in racist conversation without consciously acknowledging they do, and it takes a particular situation to realise what is happening. Gadamer’s notion of being “confronted” with a text which is outside the hearers' own experience is a good way of describing these situations (Gadamer 1989, p.268). When confronted by difference, speakers will have to learn to “break the spell of [their] own fore-meanings” (ibid).

The sociolinguistic creation of meaning

In intercultural communication, the use of metaphor for everyday occurrences can alert participants in an intercultural situation to differences and possible distortion of the communication of a seemingly common idea or value. Metaphor is a powerful mechanism for inducing insight into meaning. It “serves as a device for reorganising our perceptual and/or conceptual structure” (Black 1981, p.31). Max Black emphasises that metaphor must not be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought. Rather, metaphor has the power “to bring two separate domains into cognitive and emotional relation (in Madison 1988, p.189). Ricoeur's notion of metaphor as a mediating device is similar: “There is no self-understanding which is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts” (in Madison 1988, p.92).
One metaphor, related to the interpretation of history, illustrates the point clearly. It is taken from Muecke's (1992) fascinating account of Aboriginality, and colonial/post-colonial interpretations of Aboriginal history. Imagine that history is a reservoir of water. An Aboriginal person who wishes to understand history might swim in that reservoir and become immersed in it. A European historian might instead take a small container, dip it into the reservoir, remove a small sample and examine the water. The sample, once analysed, is casually tossed back in, or cast aside. By alluding to such a metaphor, we can understand either that miscommunication might take place, or that there is an indicator of a systemic distortion in the positioning of the interlocutors. In an intercultural situation, the metaphor alerts participants to differences in conceptualisation.

Meaning is organised differently in different cultures. People classify their social and objective worlds according to their different experiences. Metacognition and cognitive re-categorisation thus function as filtering processes in communication, whether it includes a value orientation, a moral attitude, a perception of persons, or a classification of physical, aesthetic, emotional, and other stimuli.

Bruner's classic claim that “categories by which a person sorts out and responds to the world about him reflects deeply the culture into which he is born” (Bruner 1957, p.10) is instructive here. Classificatory systems operate on various levels, from the micro-level of individual object labelling to the complexities of concept classification of abstract ideas, to a macro worldview (Triandis 1983). Research on stereotyping is a case in point. Oddou and Mendenhall note that “receiving positive or negative feedback about how one 'sees' the world and categorises it, as one would in a foreign culture, would also influence one's attitude about the experience and people in the foreign culture” (Oddou and Mendenhall 1984, p.80).

Another area of research in intercultural interaction was an investigation of the experiences of Peace Corps workers who saw their experience as "successful" and those who left their international work before their contract had expired (Detweiler 1978, 1980). It appears from his research that the so-called successful workers organised their experience into broader, more flexible categories than their less successful colleagues. He found that the broad categorisers could tolerate new contexts better, since different meanings could be accommodated more easily and were thus not in conflict with their interests.

Distortion is often interpreted via experiential learning. Young Yun Kim places great importance on interpersonal behaviours (Kim 1988, p.59) as do many researchers into cross-cultural communication. They isolate “culturally different behaviours” such as those relating to
eating habits, shopping, use of alcohol, cleanliness, sexism, touching, writing conventions and so on (see for example Hodge 1987). Of course, most behaviours are of profound complexity and are only indicators of thought and feeling. The impact of one set of norms on another depends on the interrelationships between people, their positioning as self, and their positioning in relation to the other.

Ethical-political interpretations

One of the most complex filters employed in communication is that concerning the ways in which people interpret questions of justice, goodness and rightness.

Whether moral judgments can claim universal validity or not is problematic (Habermas 1990). Analysis of different discourses points clearly, however, to my observation (Fox 1992) that differences in priorities, and in ways of communicating ethical reasoning are culturally derived and may well also be differentiated by gender, as Jean Grimshaw points out (Grimshaw 1986). Kohlberg, on the other hand, has described different stages of moral reasoning, where the supposedly highest stage concerns universal principles of ethical judgment (Kohlberg 1981). Carol Gilligan disputed Kohlberg’s conclusions and showed how principles were derived from the context of the situation (Gilligan 1982). She also came to distinguish between the ethical orientation of justice and rights and the ethical orientation of care and responsibility (Gilligan 1988). As Benhabib explains,

The contextuality, narrativity and specificity of women's moral judgment is not a sign of weakness or deficiency, but a manifestation of a vision of moral maturity that views the self as a being immersed in a network of relationships with others (Benhabib 1992, p.149).

The ethic of caring and responsibility is not only a feminine response in the West; it applies across cultures to groups of both men and women in societal contexts which expect communal support as a normative value. Studies of groups in the Pacific show that an ethic of caring and communal support varies in some ways from the Western ethic of individual caring (Fox 1992, Noddings 1984, 1994). As Noddings has noted, that perhaps the greatest contribution of an ethic of care is its emphasis on the relation and the role of the cared for" (Noddings 1994, p.9). Corson also refers to the caring, or cariño principle among many Hispanic communities in the USA (Corson, in press).

The ethical dimension is also interpreted hermeneutically and through time and space. Different cultural groups make sense of their current world as an extension of their perceptions of their own histories (and see Foucault 1978; Thompson 1990). E.T. Hall has proffered a very entertaining account of this aspect of cultural filtering in several of his works, most notably in his classic works on time and space, The
Silent Language (Hall 1959) and The Hidden Dimension (Hall 1966), and his study of the cultural aspects of time in The Dance of Life: The Other Dimension of Time (Hall 1983).

The modern interpretation of history and historical texts is a key problem area in intercultural communication. A typical example is the heated debate taking place over the terms 'invasion' and 'settlement' to describe the coming of the Europeans to Australia. Pratt draws some interesting comparisons between very early historical writings about Africa and the gradual change as Europeans encroached on more and more land, somehow changing the discourse from awed investigation to the discourse of "anti-conquest" (Pratt 1992). She describes how eighteenth century European travel writers moved away from trying to understand the intellectual and spiritual attributes of the people they met in African contexts, to creating a world where people were somehow:

speechless, denuded, biologized...dispossessed and disposable...[They were] portrayed not as undergoing historical changes in their lifeways but as having no lifeways at all, as cultureless beings...deterritorialized–extracted from the landscape in which they still live...taken out of economy, culture and history too (Pratt 1992, p.53).

With careful analysis of texts, and awareness of these processes, some light may thus be shed on the symbolic ways in which authentic communication is created and the ways in which systemic distortions can be revealed.

The meaning of authentic intercultural communication

Jürgen Habermas (1984,1987) maintains that, for authentic communication to take place, certain validity claims must be satisfied (Habermas 1984, p.99). In summary, Habermas' validity claims are that what the person is saying must be:

1. true, as far as that person knows;
2. truthful, or sincere;
3. normatively appropriate, in terms of that person's understanding of cultural norms; and
4. comprehensible to the other person.

In an intercultural context, what is normatively appropriate for one interlocutor may be quite inappropriate for the other, regardless of whether they position themselves in the same or another culture. Therefore, some agreement must be forthcoming about what can be appropriate.

Authentic communication implies, as Hans-Georg Gadamer states, the
opening of oneself to the full power of what the 'other' is saying. He shows that such an opening does not entail agreement but rather the to-and-fro play of dialogue (Gadamer 1989). It is this potential which researchers in intercultural situations can celebrate.

The implication for researchers is that whether or not they identify ideologically with a power base or the lack of it, authentic communication occurs in a particular context, in a particular situation, with a particular text and with particular speech events. It occurs when those involved are acting with the intention of reaching an understanding. This means that the interlocutors are agreeing to the same set of principles which have been deemed reasonable and fair in the context. Seyla Benhabib calls this "core intuition" (Benhabib 1992, p.37), and not to be mistaken as an outcome from linear rationality.

The core intuition behind modern universalizability procedures is not that everybody could or would agree to the same set of principles, but that these principles have been adopted as a result of a procedure, whether of moral reasoning or of public debate...It is not the result of the process...but the process .. (Benhabib 1992, p.37)

According to Corson, people with a bicultural experience are more likely to set up the conditions for authentic communication than those from a dominant culture. They, and here he is referring to Maoris living in New Zealand, "seem equipped to have a go at mediating between two very different sets of cultural experiences and to succeed more often than not" (Corson, in press). He says that this happens so that Maori people can lead "tolerable lives". This comment seems to imply that the dominant person sees no need to reach an understanding or to adapt, because their contact with minority groups does not impact on their already "tolerable" lives. Yet for both the dominant and marginalised groups, the context is intercultural. In other words, the failure of the dominant culture to adapt has more to do with motivation and ideology than with communicative possibilities. In my own study (1992) I found that people who positioned themselves as part of a dominant group were more likely to behave arrogantly and speak inappropriately than those who felt marginalised.

Reflection

Certain conditions are necessary for authentic intercultural communication to occur. These include the need for the communicators to be sincere, truthful as far as they can, and be able to explain what is normatively appropriate in the specific situation. People speak from their own subjective and cultural viewpoint as well as their ideological position. Authentic communication is possible when there is
an engagement, a resonance of feeling/understanding; when speakers' worldviews, value positions and ethical principles are able to be made explicit without coercion.

For researchers, intercultural communicative situations can be problematic, since their own positioning could lead them to interpret layers of miscommunication or distortion differently. However, I challenge the reader to identify any situation as not intercultural once class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, sense of embodied self, and all the other aspects of difference are taken into account.

In this paper I have tried to show that authentic communication is possible and can occur in complex situations. I have also concluded that, where there is a potential for that communication to be systemically distorted, but there is a genuine attempt to reach an understanding, that the interlocutors need to create their own intercultural space.

Bibliography


*(1) = Yes, I know.
(2) = No, I do not mean that
(3) = Yes, that is true.
(4) = No he is not related.