

# Comments on Poggia

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## COMMENTS ON POGLIA

Intercultural communication has developed rapidly as a new field of study in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>, stimulated in large part by a need to analyse and understand the changing conditions created by global trading trends, by increasingly intertwined interaction in the political sphere, by a growth in migratory trends on both an individual and a large scale and by the resulting multicultural complexity of our modern world. As the world shrinks to what is popularly referred to as a 'global village', the need for increased international, inter-group and interpersonal understanding becomes daily more apparent. Consequently, experts from a range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, linguistics, communications, and business and commerce, have converged in striving to characterise the type of interaction that occurs in the intercultural sphere, and to understand it better so that humanity is ultimately more able to deal with the complex issues arising from our closer and more intimate interactions with representatives of diverse cultures. A further aim has been in many cases to equip individuals with the awareness and communicative skills necessary to be able to function more successfully in the intercultural context.

Already implied here are some of the multiple contexts in which communication between cultures takes place or needs to take place: in the business world, multinational companies operate world-wide, employing an international work-force and dealing with customers from a multiplicity of backgrounds with diverse expectations and assumptions; in the political sphere, nations now operate in international alliances that are

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<sup>1</sup> Although Edward T.Hall's book 'The Silent Language' is usually accredited with signalling the birth of the study of intercultural communication, Jandt (2004) accredits it to the passing by Congress of the Foreign Service Act in 1946, which led to the provision of language and anthropological cultural training for foreign diplomats.

often institutionalised at supranational level in for a such as the United Nations or the European Union; in the military sphere, groups such as NATO and UN multinational peace keeping forces strive to maintain or restore equilibrium in the world's crisis points; at the social level, widespread migration has created multi-ethnic communities with all their potential for tension and social unrest if not competently dealt with, not to mention the supranational level, where international governmental and nongovernmental organizations such as UNESCO, OXFAM and UNICEF endeavour to deal with widespread social inequalities; and in education, students and teachers now regard the world as their marketplace for the selection of courses or for jobs, resulting in a multinational student body taught by an international staff base.

In short, people globally are in daily interaction with each other and need to function together at individual, at group and at national level, yet they come from very different backgrounds, they have widely varying cultural assumptions and expectations, and to the extent that they can be helped to understand one another their needs will be met or not met and their interactions will be more or less successful. While recognising that in the context of human relationships this can only be an ultimate ideal, the goal must nevertheless be for a world where relationships function smoothly and productively and where a harmonious state is reached. We may acknowledge that achieving such a steady state is ultimately beyond the scope of human endeavour, but to strive for less would be unworthy. At the very least, through the study of intercultural communication, more effective diagnoses of points of tension should be possible and solutions offered for their resolution. By progressing through small steps, advances can be made and through an accumulation of small steps an improvement in the human condition can be achieved.

If the need for a full understanding of intercultural communication should be evident, there still remains the question of how such understanding is to be reached and how exactly we characterise 'intercultural communication' itself. Not surprisingly, given the range of contexts in which intercultural communication occurs, its analysis has, as indicated above, become the focus of investigation for researchers from many disciplines, each bringing his or her own disciplinary perspective to bear.

Much theorizing has focused on factors leading to the success or failure of communicative interaction at personal or group level. A social psychological perspective, such as that of Gudykunst (1995, 2003), has for

instance sought to explain the role of uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural inter-group communication, where lack of knowledge of the 'other' leads to heightened fear and an absence of trust. This work has both a theoretical and a practical dimension, offering in-depth analysis of what intercultural communication involves in terms of challenges to our existing preconceptions about dealing with 'strangers' and also practical advice for the prediction of likely areas of difficulty. Gudykunst's 'Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory' is but one of a proliferation of theories that similarly explore the social and psychological factors involved in intercultural communication. In 'Communication Accommodation Theory' (Gallois et al. 1995, 2005), the aim is to predict factors relating to social identity, cultural variability, and especially language use that will impinge on groups' or individuals' perceptions of each other and influence behaviour accordingly, affecting the degree to which the groups mutually adjust or 'accommodate' the other. 'Face negotiation theory' on the other hand focuses more intently on the detail of face-to-face interaction between individuals in interpersonal communication, both within and across cultures (Ting-Toomey & Korzenny 1993, Ting-Toomey 2005), and on the adjustments necessary, especially in negotiations within situations of conflict. As the name implies, the theory looks at behaviours resulting from cultural expectations about 'face' and on the potential for conflict when those expectations collide, or at the very least, do not coincide.

A slightly different approach emerges from the cognitive psychological perspective taken by 'Cultural Schema Theory' (Nishida 2005), whereby humans are shown to learn cultural frameworks through experience, the resulting memorised schema then guiding their behaviour and expectations in new cultural contexts and providing them with the knowledge that permits them to function effectively in face-to-face communication. Cultural adaptation thus becomes a case of learning new schema to co-exist alongside the ones already learned in previous cultural contexts.

These are but a few of the theories emerging in the social-psychological, sociolinguistic or cognitive psychological areas. Underlying them, however, are often the important theoretical insights of Hofstede (1980, 1991), whose pioneering work on cultural variables has informed much subsequent intercultural research, especially, but not only, in the context of international business. Hofstede's characterisation of societies along

four, then later five, cultural dimensions associates typical values with those dimensions. Thus, power distance relates to the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally; individualism denotes the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups; masculinity (as opposed to femininity), refers to the distribution of roles between the genders; uncertainty avoidance denotes a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; and finally long-term orientation is associated with values like thrift and perseverance compared with short-term respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations, and protecting one's 'face'. Along these dimensions, and on the basis of large-scale empirical studies, Hofstede offers a characterisation of societies according to the values they are likely to espouse. While many might challenge such generalising characterisations, the value of Hofstede's work has been invaluable for the research that it has subsequently promoted and for the set of assumptions against which others can measure their own findings.

If the study of intercultural communication is now well established, underpinning theories nonetheless are relatively new. Gudykunst (2005: vii) notes that in the mid 1980s 'there were no theories of intercultural communication'. Now the situation has changed to the extent that some have called it 'over-theorised' (Moulakis 2006: 119) although others are still lamenting the lack of underpinning theories of intercultural communication (Nishida 2005: 402). Nonetheless, the move towards theorizing is reflected in a number of volumes of theoretical papers that have appeared in recent years, notably those edited by Wiseman (1995), and Gudykunst himself (2005). What these show is a wide range of theoretical positions, some of them indicated above.

What there is not at present is an over-arching meta-theory of intercultural communication that accommodates the range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives. It is precisely this challenge that Edo Pogliа has set himself with the Lugano *I2C* model for improving intercultural communication. He has correctly identified the absence of a coherent model for intercultural communication among the wide variety of disciplinary approaches and underlying methodologies briefly characterised above. This is always likely to be the case when a range of experts from divergent disciplines converge on a new field of study as has happened here. It is not unlike the situation in second language acquisition, where a gamut of theoretical perspectives from psycholinguistics, soci-

olinguistics, anthropological linguistics and general linguistics, for instance, have so far failed to produce an encompassing theory to explain how individuals learn a second language. Instead partial explanations exist of certain dimensions of the process, depending on the interest and specialist expertise of the researchers involved but a coherent, all-inclusive model is still lacking .

Poglia identifies a similar situation with regard to intercultural communication and notes how, not only the theoretical perspectives, but also the associated methodologies tend to be compartmentalized, according to discipline, so that insights on one dimension do not feed into another: no true interaction takes place between the disciplines and thus, so far, a truly interdisciplinary dynamic has not emerged for the understanding of this important area of human behaviour.

The challenge to produce an integrated theory or model is a major undertaking in any sphere, and because of the complexity of components involved in this particular one the resulting model is likely to be complex too. At one level the aim of the Lugano model is to bring together the wide variety of approaches, resulting in a multi-layered, multi-dimensional model. However, the dual aim is a functional one, involving the development of analytical tools that can be used in the practical analysis of intercultural communication within projects of real social value. Furthermore, there is a specifically didactic aim to this development project, whereby thanks to the support of the Swiss Virtual Campus the model will soon be available in electronic format on a multi-media platform for the benefit of those learning and teaching in this area.

The value of this initiative is undeniable but its worth will be reflected in the amount of reaction and response that it stimulates. This indeed is the major purpose of theorising and the test of the Lugano model, as with any good theory, will be the amount of discussion and dissent it provokes. For what this represents is a significant first step, a new approach towards co-ordinating and making coherent the growing body of knowledge in the field of intercultural communication. If this work succeeds even only partially in achieving its bold aims, those engaged in the study of intercultural communication, or indeed in the practical realities of dealing with issues arising from intercultural interaction, will have cause to thank Edo Poglia and his colleagues for taking up the challenge.

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