

# Theoretical Turbulence in Intercultural Communication Studies



Theoretical Turbulence in Intercultural  
Communication Studies

Edited by

Saila Poutiainen

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P U B L I S H I N G

Theoretical Turbulence in Intercultural Communication Studies,  
Edited by Salla Poutiainen

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5353-4, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5353-8

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In December 2011, some one hundred researchers and practitioners gathered in Helsinki for the 18th symposium of the Nordic Network for the Intercultural Communication (NIC). The articles in this book were competitively chosen from papers presented in the symposium, and were evaluated in a blind peer-review process.

In the editing process, a “planeiful” of individuals has provided their time and academic expertise for improving the quality of the book. First, the reviewers and their dedicated contributions were invaluable—thank you! Second, I wish to thank Professor Fred Dervin (University of Helsinki) for your generous, practical, and understanding guidance throughout the process. Third, Ms Riitta-Ilona Hurmerinta, who copy-edited the manuscript, deserves heartfelt thanks for her keen interest even in minor textual details! Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the international scientific committee, who supported the editing process at different stages. The committee consisted of M.A. Nancy Aalto (University of Tampere), M.A. Eila Isotalus (Unidos Ltd., Helsinki), Ph.D. Anne Kankaanranta (Aalto University, Schools of Business), Ph.D. Pipsa Purhonen (Ramboll Ltd., Helsinki), and Ph.D. Sarri Vuorisalo-Tiitinen (University of Helsinki). Thank you for your kind and all-inclusive support!





# INTRODUCTION

SAILA POUTIAINEN

The title of the book suggests a bumpy ride. Although in air travel—and apparently in academia as well—turbulence is normal and no surprise, it is still annoying, or at least uncomfortable. Turbulence can be light, moderate or severe. There are multiple reasons for it, as well as multiple ways to understand and deal with it. Some of us are more comfortable with turbulence than others. Turbulence shakes things up, and thus can cause worry, chaos and fear. For others, a little turbulence is an exciting and fun (learning) experience.

In addition, the title of the book suggests something about to take place *inter*, as in between, among, or within cultures. The writers identify themselves as scholars of intercultural communication. This book is not designed to examine *intercultural* in relation to closely related terms such as *cross-cultural* (e.g. Gudykunst, 2003), *transcultural* (Welsch, 1999), or *omnicultural* (Moghaddam, 2010), although the differences are, in some cases, meaningful.

To describe theoretical turbulence in the field of intercultural communication studies is an exhausting task even for an edited collection of articles. The main reason is that intercultural communication is a profoundly multidisciplinary field. For example, the writers for this collection identify their fields as action research, cultural studies, literature, English as a Foreign Language teaching, communication, management studies, sociolinguistics, and cross-cultural psychology, among others. Every discipline has its particular discussions on, for example, how to define culture, communication, and their relationship (e.g. in sociolinguistics, see Blommaert, 1998; Busch, 2009; Jackson, 2011; Paulston, Kiesling & Rangel, 2012; Piller, 2007). The divisions among and within disciplines imply variety and breadth in the research and theory of intercultural communication, and the discussion on theoretical turbulence is understandably versatile.

I am personally most familiar with the discussion in and of the communication discipline. Robert Craig presented in 1999 a constitutive meta-model for the discipline: its seven traditions (Rhetorical, Semiotic,

Phenomenological, Cybernetic, Sociopsychological, Sociocultural, and Critical) are today widely applied and discussed. Craig (1999, p. 119) claims that “communication theory as an identifiable field of study does not yet exist. Rather than addressing a field of theory, we appear to be operating primarily in separate domains.” Craig does not refer to subfields (intercultural communication being one), but describes the heterogeneous intellectual traditions among which the “underlying conceptions of communicative practice” (p. 135), its nature and ways to approach its research differ radically. We could find research on intercultural communication from all the seven traditions.

When looking at intercultural communication research within Craig’s meta-model, we could claim that researchers even in the communication discipline do not share ways of speaking, thinking, or approaching intercultural communication, or communication and culture. Both communication and culture are defined not only in multiple ways, but also the definitions are so distant from each other that representatives of different meta-discourses do not meet—not in actual conversations or in thinking. Considering the theoretical turbulence in the intercultural communication field, this could mean that there is a lot of turbulence taking place, or even turbulence others are not aware of.

Craig (1999, 2008) also suggests that communication is a practical discipline in which “we must reconstruct theory as a theoretical metadiscourse engaged in dialogue with the practical metadiscourse of everyday life” (Craig, 1999, p. 129). Intercultural communication as a subfield is a perfect example of that: its origins are in training (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990), and even today, intercultural communication education and training are delivered for all kinds of audiences. The theoretical turbulence is also turbulence in and about the applications of intercultural communication research: one reason for the turbulence is the ways in which our practical, everyday-life notions are inconsistent with the theoretical formulations of intercultural communication. Researchers, but also trainers and educators of intercultural communication, have recognized problems with and insufficiencies in the available theories of intercultural communication. The existing or most popular models just “do not seem to work”, or “they no longer make sense”. The “engine” in the turbulence is, in practice, to improve that what we know, while ultimately, knowledge produced in the communication discipline, including intercultural communication, is about “how to usefully address practical concerns in the society” (Craig, 2008, p. 9).

These questions from our everyday experiences as well as theoretical turbulence suggest a paradigm shift, which is addressed in several articles

in this book. Kuhn (1962) might not call the theoretical turbulence in hand a paradigm shift of a mature science, although it certainly resembles one: the scholars are looking and arguing for and even occasionally defining, the best theory for the field, and in the process rejecting the existing one(s). The researchers are re-stating the essence of culture and communication. Whether it is a paradigm shift or not, there is theoretical turbulence that is (hopefully) affecting our ways of thinking, practicing, studying, and training/educating for intercultural communication.

This book discusses themes in intercultural communication that theoretical turbulence has an effect on across disciplines. These themes could be that which we, a diverse group of scholars of intercultural communication, share more broadly:

First and foremost, intercultural communication scholars share the profound interest in understanding the relationship between culture and communication. We define both key concepts in more than multiple ways, and do not even always agree if there is a relationship. Yet, whether inter- or cross-, trans- or multi-, we are interested in cultures and communication.

Also, we seem to share a sense of our origins. As Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz (1990) has pointed out almost a quarter century ago, scholars of intercultural communication consider Edward T. Hall's work as the starting point of the field. The need for practical applications of our work are still attached to our research.

Further, all the writers in this collection acknowledge the importance of Geert Hofstede's and his associates work (1980, 1991) while they present alternative ways for understanding culture and communication. In several chapters, research and tradition titled as positivist, functionalist, comparative, or even simply quantitative are presented as the old paradigm, and writers of this book name Hall (1976), Hofstede (1980, 1991), Lewis (1999), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993) as representatives of that paradigm. The idea of treating culture as a synonym for nation-state is considered no longer possible, and the time for appreciating universalities in intercultural communication might be over. Gillian Warner-Söderholm (Chapter Four) pulls together some of the existing criticism and Michael Pörner (Chapter Seven) discusses ways in which the long tradition of Eastern-Western dialectic is problematic, how Chinese culture in particular is portrayed, and what the consequences of rather simplistic solutions are.

Moving away from quantitative cross-cultural (- cross-nation) analyses of reported communication means moving towards, for example, analyses of micro-level interactions, self- and other perceptions, visual communication, interpretations, competence, and communication processes.

Victor Friedman (Chapter One) and Alex Frame (Chapter Two) describe more suitable and perhaps more complex approaches from two different viewpoints. They bring sense-making processes and negotiation of reality (or meaning) into the focus. Further, for these new analyses we need appropriate methods that are applicable to the phenomena and research target in hand. The need for these are discussed by Iben Jensen and Lars Birch Andreassen (Chapter Three). Warner-Søderholm's article focuses on validity and reliability in particular, and Stefanie Stadler (Chapter Six) considers particular ways in which to study perceptions in interaction.

While the new approaches are suggested, it is fair to acknowledge, as Warner-Søderholm does, that some of the comparative models are built on extensive data that should be considered valuable and taken advantage of for new analyses. Further, Hanne Tange (Chapter Eight) also makes a practical point about intercultural communication education: the researchers and models that have heavily influenced the field should also be introduced to students, for many reasons.

Although this book introduces critical takes on the existing intercultural communication theorizing, this book is not a collection of articles from the so-called critical perspective (for such, see e.g. Cheong, Martin & Macfadyen, 2012; Dervin, Gajardo & Lavanchy, 2011; Nakayama & Halualani, 2011; Piller, 2011). Instead, as in any field, subfield or discipline, the writers/researchers are critically evaluating the existing approaches and theories, and the needs for and features of the new ones. After all, research is critical in multiple ways (Carbaugh, 1989).

If we look at intercultural communication as a practical discipline, it is fair to ask, what are the ways in which, for example, business and education are affected by changes in theoretical constructions. What should be taught in order to increase students' intercultural communication competence? What are the suitable pedagogical applications of theoretical knowledge in teaching and consultation? In this book Tange and Elke Schuch (Chapter Nine), representing different disciplines, describe and argue for their personal solutions. Tange and Schuch, as well as Stadler turn our eye towards sensitivity and self-awareness, which are key aspects in intercultural competence.

Finally, a way to bring theoretical turbulence into the intercultural communication field is to introduce new areas of research and theorizing. One such area is new media (e.g. Shuter, 2012), and another one is discussed in this book by Sabrina Bresciani (Chapter Five): visual communication. An interesting question is how culture is conceptualized in these new areas.

As before, we will survive the theoretical turbulence whether light, moderate or severe. The plane stays in the air and moves onward, maybe on a slightly different track. Coming out of the turbulence, what are we aiming at? One of the most recent publications in intercultural communication (Asante, Miike & Yin, 2014, see also Cooks, 2001) features the future of intercultural communication research with very similar strokes as discussed in this collection.

Firstly, we should aim at integrating micro- and macro-levels of culture, contexts, and communication. There is still very little research in intercultural communication that combines, for example, political, economic, or institutional discourses with analyses of face-to-face interactions. We could extend our research on interpersonal ideologies (Fitch, 1998), or examine the micro- and macro-levels, for example, in the new media forms of communication.

Secondly, we should be interested in the indigenous theoretical perspectives on culture and communication. Instead of calling for, for example, non-Western views of communication (Kim, 2002), we should appreciate the “local theories” (Carbaugh & Hastings, 1992; also Geertz, 1973) for communicating, being, and relating, as well as for feeling and dwelling. For the perspective or theory to be indigenous or local, we do not need to limit our thinking with particular physical locations, passports, or languages. As researchers, we should be aware of the “locality” of our own concepts: when examining, for instance, power and privilege and their impact on intercultural communication and on its research, we could be faced with multiple valid understandings of power, not just the researcher’s.

The descriptions and takes on theoretical turbulence in the intercultural communication studies presented in this collection are designed to direct us to fundamental questions, ethical concerns, critical reflections, improved practical applications and eventually, hopefully, better theories and further research.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# NEGOTIATING REALITY: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL SPACE

VICTOR FRIEDMAN

Human action is known only in its realization; only when it is realized are we aware of its living possibilities [...] indeed, its work is precisely that of seeking and creating ever new possibilities [...]. (Ernst Cassirer, 1961, p. 37)

### **My Theoretical Turbulence**

Given the central theme of this book I want to begin by describing my own theoretical turbulence in the field of intercultural communication. I grew up in the United States with a strong Jewish and Zionist identity, which led me to Israel as a high school exchange student in 1969. There I became interested in Arab-Jewish relations and peace work. In college I studied Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies and afterwards travelled in the Arab world, worked as a high-school English teacher in Arab villages in Israel, and coordinated a program to promote Arab-Jewish cooperation. At that time there were no counseling services in the Arab schools in Israel and students often came to me talk about their problems. I felt that I lacked the knowledge to be of real help, especially considering the cultural differences, so I decided to do a master's degree and later a doctorate in cross-cultural psychology and use that knowledge to develop culturally appropriate school counseling services for Arab children in Israel.

In graduate school I experienced a dilemma when confronting theories and practices in the field of cross-cultural psychology and counseling, which was at a fledgling stage at the time (the early 1980's). Viewing all

people through the same theoretical and practice lens—what I called the ethnocentric approach—meant ignoring cultural differences and implied imposing Western ideas on non-Western people. Most of my cross-cultural courses were out to refute this approach and I agreed with these critiques. The alternative approach was to engage cultures on their own terms and try to grasp indigenous understandings of human behavior, psychological problems, and methods of intervention. The implicit message was to use knowledge of culture to adapt interventions in ways that are sensitive to other cultures and work within their system of norms, traditions, and ways of thinking and acting (e.g. Levine, 1984; Triandis, 1996). This alternative made good sense to me and resonated with the questions I was asking myself.

Soon, however, this second approach began to trouble me as well. While the need for cultural sensitivity seemed almost obvious, it also seemed presumptuous to believe that I could truly understand another culture, or its *mentality*, from an inside perspective. And, even if were able to acquire such knowledge, it seemed even more presumptuous to assume that I could adapt myself to another culture in anything more than a superficial way. At the same time, in the desire not to impose, I sensed a rejection, if not downright hostility, toward Western culture and a tendency to romanticize the non-Western. I felt as if I were being asked to *go native* and give up a part of myself in order to be able to work with people from a different culture. The deeper I delved into cross-cultural studies, the more strongly I felt that I could identify with neither of these two poles – ethnocentrism nor going native. And it was not at all clear whether there was some stable middle ground upon which to stand. Furthermore, having come freshly from a number of years as a practitioner in the field, I increasingly found the cross-cultural research I was reading and the research methods I was learning inadequate. Although much of it was very interesting, I could not see how the knowledge it produced could really guide practice.

In retrospect I could see that my theoretical turbulence was the result of being caught by conflicting currents in thinking culture and intercultural communication that Weber and Dacin (2011) described as two waves of cultural analysis. The first rule for a swimmer caught in cross-currents is not to fight them, but to go with the flow until they bring you back to shore. And, indeed, I allowed myself to be pulled by a set of ideas from the field of organizational behavior that took me quite far from culture *per se*, but eventually enabled me to develop a new approach to the theory, practice, and research of intercultural communication.

The goal of this chapter is to present this approach, which we call “negotiating reality” and its theoretical groundings (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009; Arieli & Friedman, 2011; Berthoin Antal & Friedman, 2008; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2006). The chapter begins by describing the theoretical turbulence reflected in the two waves of cultural analysis (Weber & Dacin, 2011). It then critiques the logic of adaptation implicit in the first wave and draws on both waves to conceptualize intercultural communication as the construction of social space (Bourdieu, 1985, 1989, 1993, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Cassirer, 1923/1953, 1944, 1961; Friedman, 2011; Lewin, 1936, 1948/1997, 1951/1997). On this basis, the chapter then presents negotiating reality as a method for the self-conscious construction of social space through processes of joint inquiry drawn from action science (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1987, 1996; Friedman, 2001; Friedman & Rogers, 2008). Finally, the chapter concludes by considering the implications of this approach for the research of intercultural communication.

## **Two Waves of Cultural Analysis: From Adaptation to Repertoire**

The first wave of cultural analysis, which began in the 1980’s, focused on the collective meaning systems of groups at all levels of aggregations such that ethnic groups, nations, organizations and professions could be thought of as cultures, or having cultures (Weber & Dacin, 2011). The second wave came around 2000 and focused more broadly on processes of cultural construction and the strategic uses of culture rather than on cultures as distinct objects of study (Weber & Dacin, 2011). The first wave was influenced by the dominant approach in social anthropology and ethnographic research, which focused on how cultures make sense of and control the physical and human world by providing answers to fundamental questions of existence (e.g. Geertz, 1973; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). This wave strongly reflected Max Weber’s emphasis on values as the foundation of culture and a key component of social action (Kaufman, 2004). Culture defined in this way is created by groups, transmitted to individuals through processes of socialization, and maintained through the institutions in the form of explicit or implicit rules, models, and templates for behaviour and interpretation that negatively constrain action, define opportunity, and facilitate patterns of interaction (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Schein, 1985; Weber & Dacin, 2011).

Intercultural analysis of the first wave was exemplified by comparative studies that sought to identify basic dimensions of national cultures and their effect on organizational behavior in cross-cultural contexts (Hofstede 1980, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Hofstede (1980, p. 25), for example, defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another.” His pioneering research, based on data from 72 national subsidiaries of IBM, produced a framework for classifying cultures according to differences along a finite set of dimensions. Despite serious methodological and conceptual flaws in Hofstede’s work (see Frame in this volume; McSweeney, 2002), this framework has had an enormous influence on both researchers and practitioners seeking to analyze, explain, and address challenges in intercultural communication.

The first wave of intercultural analysis emphasized constraints and conflict (Weber & Dacin, 2011). According to this perspective, culture constrains because individuals are embedded within cultural contexts—national, organizational, or otherwise—that powerfully determine behaviour or, at least, limit the range of acceptable behaviour. Intercultural contact leads to conflict because people belonging to different cultures hold fundamentally different values and assumptions which lead them to think and act in ways that are often at odds with each other. Thus, the first wave of culture led to an extensive literature aimed at identifying and classifying difference so that potential conflicts could be anticipated, avoided or resolved (e.g. Early & Erez, 1997; Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

A logic of *adaptation* is implicit in first wave approaches to effective intercultural communication. Adaptation can be defined as knowing enough about another culture to intentionally shift frame of reference and modify behaviour to fit its norms (Bennet, 1986). The logic of adaptation is based on the following propositions: (1) culture is an overarching framework of values, meanings, and norms that shapes behavior, (2) individuals can be seen as *belonging to* a distinct culture, (3) cultural differences cause conflict, (4) research, training, and experience can enable people to know enough about other cultures to shift their frames of reference, and (5) people can modify their thinking, behavior, or policies so as to fit other cultures’ norms and avoid or resolve conflict.

On the surface, these propositions seem to make perfect sense. The second wave of cultural analysis, however, offered ways of thinking about culture that pointed to the limits of adaptation as an approach to effective intercultural communication. Rather than studying how cultures are shaped by external factors or how cultures shape individual behavior, this

second wave adopted an *endogenous* perspective (Kaufmann, 2004; see Pörner in this volume for an in-depth critique of first wave analysis of Chinese culture). It focused on cultures and cultural materials as produced and used by people for their own pragmatic ends (e.g. Baker & Nelson 2005; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001).

The second wave directly challenged the first proposition in the logic of adaptation – that culture is an overarching framework of values, meanings, and norms that shapes behaviors. For example, Swidler (1986), one of the seminal theorists of the second wave, questioned conceptions of culture as “a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction” (p. 277). Instead, she proposed thinking of culture as a *tool-kit* or *repertoire* of capacities for constructing action strategies (Swidler, 1986, p. 284). Rather than constraining thinking and action, culture offers resources “which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273).

Thinking of culture in terms of repertoires stands the second proposition—that people belong to distinct cultures—on its head. Rather than people belonging to a culture, culture belongs to people and they can make use of different cultures in many different and creative ways. This second wave approach has received support from research showing how individuals with bi-cultural backgrounds (e.g. having parents from and growing up in different national backgrounds) draw on different culturally shaped ways of perceiving and dealing with situations (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Bennet-Martinez, 2000). From this perspective culture is “a loose network of domain-specific knowledge structures, such as categories and implicit theories’ rather than an integrated and highly generalised structure” (Hong et al., 2000, p. 710). In the modern world the idea of cultural repertoire accurately reflects the cultural complexity of many, if not most, people. Rather than belonging to a single culture, people are the beneficiaries of rich and varied cultural materials drawn from their regional, religious, professional, and organization affiliations—just to name a few.

Even if we accept (and I do) the first wave idea that the concept of culture can be used to capture relatively stable patterns of difference among groups, it does not necessarily mean accepting the third proposition—that cultural differences cause conflict. The second wave idea of a cultural repertoire attributes to individuals a high degree of agency in deciding what cultural materials to use and how to use them. According to this perspective, conflict, and how it is played out, can be seen as the result of how people choose to draw on their cultural repertoires and to perceive and respond to the strategies of others. These

choices may not be explicit or even made with conscious awareness, but, as will be seen, the potential for choice offers opportunities for constructively engaging differences rather than trying to avoid them.

From a second wave perspective difference in cultural repertoires and even conflict can be seen as opportunities rather than as constraints. Since every individual's cultural repertoire is limited, it may fall short of providing the best action strategy for dealing with a particular problem or situation. The ability to draw on the different and varied repertoires of others offers a potentially richer set of tools for perceiving and solving problems. Indeed, one of the subtle dangers of the adaptation approach is missing opportunities for learning as a result of avoiding conflicts or trying to resolve them too quickly.

The fourth proposition in the logic adaptation is that research, training, and experience can enable people to know enough other cultures so as to shift their frames of reference. Here the two waves of cultural analysis meet. On the one hand, there is good sense in the first wave idea that careful observation can identify different groups as well as produce valid descriptions of what is similar and what is different among them. And this kind of knowledge can be useful in guiding interpretation and action in a certain spheres of action such as highly ritualized norms for eating and greeting. On the other hand, the second wave points to the limits of what we can know in advance about the cultural repertoires of individuals and how they use them. It casts doubt on the notion of holistic cultural frames of reference that can be shifted as easily as in the cognitive shift exercises of Gestalt psychology.

The second wave of cultural analysis should sensitize us to the presumptuousness in thinking that there is some kind of *a priori* knowledge that we can acquire so as to truly understand how members of another group think and act in particular situations. Such an approach reflects a kind of rigid essentialism that labels groups of people in ways that confuses intercultural knowledge with stereotyping (Sayer, 1997). It also lends itself to highly manipulative attempts to understand the other's mentality so as to get what we want from them—without every discussing what they really think or want. This critique does not mean that people cannot or should not try to understand the perspective of others or even change their frames of reference accordingly. To the contrary, this kind of learning is at the heart of intercultural competence. However as will be seen, it can only proceed with specific people in specific contexts – and with a self-critical awareness of the limits of what we can know about others.

Finally, the logic of adaptation assumes that people can modify their thinking and behavior so as to fit other culture's norms. However, even if people were able to really know what is appropriate, or inappropriate, in a specific situation, there are significant limits to putting that knowledge into practice. For example, one of my most vivid memories as a teacher in Arab high schools in Israel, was the time when the father of one of my students said "I want you to hit my son every day!". Now I did not take him literally. Indeed, I understood him as saying that discipline and respect for authority was essential for his son's success in school—and in life. I also interpreted his statement as an expression of deep love for his son and concern that he receives a good education. I also knew that corporal punishment, while officially forbidden, was the norm in the school. Many teachers advised me that it was essential to hit at least one of the students at the beginning of the year in order to establish your authority, gain respect, and maintain control over the class. On the other hand, I also understood from them that the regular use corporal punishment meant a loss of authority.

Even if all of my thinking about this situation were accurate, I could never hit my students. It was simply not in my cultural repertoire. Even if I tried to act in this culturally appropriate way, it would just have been play-acting and probably would not have had the desired effect. On the other hand, I had a rich cultural repertoire that offered me lots of other ways to try to establish authority and gain respect. Furthermore, even though I could understand the local norm of corporal punishment, which was at odds with official policy, I did not want to act *appropriately* or adapt myself to it. I wanted to challenge it. I wanted to talk with my colleagues, the parents and the students and question whether corporal punishment was really necessary or the best way of obtaining respect and maintaining authority.

Finally, there is the question of who adapts to whom. For example, one of the speakers at the Nordic Network for Intercultural Communication (NIC) Symposium in December 2011, told a story about a British firm that was about to do business with a Chinese company and sent all its managers to training program to learn appropriate business behavior with Chinese. When they got to China, what they experienced was completely different from what they were prepared for. The meeting did not go well and the partnership was put on hold. A few years later the organization decided to try again. This time, however, they decided to talk with their Chinese counterparts about what had happened the first time and why it did not succeed. What they discovered was that the Chinese had also taken

undergone training on appropriate business methods when working with the British!

My own theoretical turbulence over intercultural communication anticipated the clash between these two waves of cultural analysis. Nevertheless, the foregoing critique of the logic of adaptation is not intended as a rejection of all first wave ideas, which produced sensible and important ideas as well as an antidote to a culturally-blind, ethnocentrism. At the same time, the first wave focus on clearly defining collective differences tended to reify culture and cultural differences, leading me to wonder how I could act interculturally with integrity—that is, how I could bring my full self to the meeting of others while neither imposing my own way on them nor automatically adjusting to theirs. The second wave, by focusing more on the individual as producer of culture, points a way out of this impasse. Indeed, the clash of the two waves implies developing an approach to culture that links, content and process, the collective and the individual, and psychological and social processes. In the following section, I will present a theory of culture as social space that makes it possible to integrate these various dualities into a single framework. Finally, this framework will provide the basis of negotiating reality – a method that focuses on intercultural communication as jointly constructing shared social spaces.

## **Intercultural Communication as the Construction of Social Space**

The idea of social space was the theoretical cornerstone for two of the twentieth century's most influential, and non-conventional, social scientists: the psychologist Kurt Lewin (1936, 1948/1997, 1951/1997) and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 1989, 1993, 1998; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Both men drew on the philosophical work of Ernst Cassirer (1923/1953, 1944, 1961), which argued for a relational logic of social reality. In contrast to substantialist logic, which focuses on entities, a “relational logic” accords primacy to relations among entities as that which is *real*. In other words, reality is best grasped as an *ordering* of elements of perception through a *process* of construction that gives them intelligibility and meaning (Cassirer, 1923/1953; Friedman, 2011). The concept of social space provided both Lewin and Bourdieu with a set of constructs for a relational analysis of psychological and social phenomena. Both men developed *field* theories, borrowing from physics the concept of a *field of force*, to explain how social spaces (e.g. culture) exert influence on the behavior of individuals and vice versa.



Social spaces take shape as interactions among people who enact their thinking and feeling and encounter the enacted thinking and feelings of others. These interactions are causal loops that link our thinking and feeling with the responses from other(s), which then shape our thinking, feeling, and action. If interaction is temporary or fleeting, then a social space is unlikely to form. However, when interactions are sustained over time and become patterned, they take on a particular configuration that differentiates them from other patterned interactions. Differentiation leads to the creation of a space or a field that reaches beyond individuals, but is never wholly independent of them.

Configurations of social space, or fields, can be characterized by their unique constituents, the nature of their relationships, the rules of the game that govern interaction, and the shared meanings that hold the space together and facilitate sustained interaction (Friedman, 2011). It is the unique configurations of different fields that we refer to when we speak of *culture* to describe the defining characteristics of a particular group – whether it be nations, regions, organizations, professions, or any other field. At the same time, most people are constituents of and are influenced by multiple fields. They can be thought of as occupying a unique point in space where all the fields with which they are associated intersect. A person's cultural repertoire reflects the knowledge available to this person from all of these intersecting fields.

The analysis of culture as social space leads naturally to a constructionist approach to intercultural communication. Social constructionism views social reality as the product of “communities of agreement” (Gergen, 2008, p.161) or “communities of practice” (Argyris et al; 1985; Friedman, 2001) generated through historically situated processes of interaction (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Gergen, 2001, 2008, 2009). In these processes, the external world and the internal, cognitive worlds of individuals are tightly linked, each one shaping the other in an on-going, reflexive, and intersubjective process of world-making and formation of self (Argyris et al, 1985; Friedman, 2011; Bateson, 1972; Bourdieu, 1985, 1998; Lewin, 1948/1997; Sargent, Picard, & Jull, 2011).

The unit of analysis for a constructionist approach is neither the individual nor the group, but the relationship – defined as the causal loops that link the internal and external worlds. It combines first and second waves of cultural analysis into a framework that enables us to trace the links between culture and the individuals who constantly construct or reconstruct it through their thinking and action. If culture is actually a product of people's enacting their repertoires with others, then it can also be changed, at least in part, through conscious reflection with others.

However, people tend to perceive culture as a given. They are usually unaware of the dynamic, on-going intersubjective loop through which they shape and are shaped by culture. A constructionist perspective invites people to step out of this loop and critically reflect on culture.

## Negotiating Reality

Because any given culture is a dynamic configuration of social space among many possible configurations, cultural diversity and even conflict offer particularly fruitful opportunities for discovery, growth, adaptation, and learning (Easely, 2010; Nan, 2011; Rothman, 1997, Sargent et al., 2011). Encountering people who are influenced by different cultures potentially reveals gaps in a person's repertoire. Thus, it is precisely the *lack of fit* among cultural repertoires that provides the potential for seeing gaps between the given and the possible. These gaps can lead people to critically inquire their cultural repertoires and to make choices about seeing, thinking, feeling, and acting. We call this process of inquiry and choice negotiating reality—that is, intercultural communication as the conscious construction of social space.

Negotiating reality was developed in our attempts to apply ideas from action science (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Friedman, 2001; Friedman & Rogers, 2008) to the field of intercultural communication and, especially, conflict (Arieli, Friedman & Agbaria, 2009; Berthoin Antal & Friedman, 2008; Arieli & Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Berthoin Antal, 2006; see also Pörner in this volume). The method of negotiating reality is based on the observation that social space is constructed among people through cognitive and behavioral processes that occur almost automatically and out of conscious awareness. Within the causal loops that create and reinforce social space, there are points at which people make choices about how to interpret reality, to feel, and to act—and these choices influence constructed space. Negotiating reality attempts to bring these choices into awareness, so that people can critically examine them. Providing greater choice in this process expands the realm of what is possible for them, for others, and for the cultures they enact together (Friedman 2011).

In order to operationalize cultural repertoires and the construction processes, we draw on the action science concept of *theories of action* (Argyris, 1982; Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978, 1996; Friedman, 2001). According to this approach, all human reasoning and action are guided by mental theories, similar to computer programs, of the following form: under the set of conditions X, in order to achieve goal Y, do Z. Theories of

action are stored in the mind and enable us to react to a variety of situations almost automatically, for example, without conscious awareness. A good example how theories of action work is driving a car. Everyone who drives has had the experience of speeding along a superhighway while being so deep in thought about something that one is quite unaware of the driving itself for quite a long time. People can perform this feat because they have a very good theory of action for driving that enables them to process information and trigger the appropriate response in order to get where they want to go—without having to engage in conscious thought. Just as driving is governed by a tacit set of theories that enable people get where they want to go, so to everyday behavior is governed by tacit theories that enable people to read situations and deal with them effectively without having to invest much conscious thought.

From this perspective, people's cultural repertoires are complex theories of action that have been shaped, at least in part, by the various cultures that influence them. However, the process of constructing a strategy of action is usually not consciously goal-oriented (Swidler, 1986). In fact, people are generally unaware of the process of drawing on their culturally shaped repertoires when interacting with one another, which is precisely what enables them to be culturally competent within particular communities. Unawareness plays an important role in enabling us to enact our theories of action/cultural repertoires with great skill—that is, almost automatically and without conscious thought. This competence, however, often becomes a stumbling block in intercultural interactions, where the conscious mode is important for learning from experience by testing and changing cultural repertoires. In other words, *cultural* competence is the ability to enact one's repertoire without any conscious awareness, whereas *intercultural* competence is the ability to become aware of one's repertoire and to make conscious choices about how to perceive reality and how to act in a particular situation.

When we negotiate reality with others, we are deliberating over our cultural repertoires and how they lead us to perceive reality and to act in particular situations. The process of negotiating reality is guided by asking three questions: What? Why? How? First, people need to ask themselves and each others *what* (initial conditions) *they see* as going on in a particular situation. Second, they need to ask *what desired outcomes* (goals) are implicit in their behavior in this situation. Finally, they need to ask *how* they go about achieving these goals (action strategies) so far.

From the perspective of negotiating reality, perceptions of the situation are hypotheses that need to be tested against the information available and

against alternative hypotheses. Testing involves asking questions such as: On the basis of what information did I construct my view of the situation? What led me to select that information? What did I ignore or miss? What was the quality of the information? What led me to make particular interpretations? How closely connected is my interpretation to the information from which I constructed it? To what extent are alternative hypotheses more closely connected to the data or more logical? Asking these questions in an intercultural interaction helps people discover that they overlooked or misinterpreted critical information as well as untested assumptions.

Negotiating reality attempts to enable people to discover the underlying frames implicit in their theories of action. Frames enable people to organize and make sense of information, shaping the way they perceive the actions of others and how they should respond to them (Argyris et al., 1985; Goffman, 1974; Sargent et al., 2011; Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974). Viewing another's thinking and action through one's own frame often makes it seem nonsensical. The tendency of people to impose their frames onto others leads to struggles for control as well as to increased misunderstanding (Argyris et al., 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1974; Sargent et al., 2011). Furthermore, frames lock people into particular ways of seeing situations and prevent them from seeing alternative ways of thinking and acting. Thus, discovering one's framing of problematic situations can be liberating because it allows for reframing in ways that open new possibilities for interpreting and acting.

Reframing requires combining high advocacy with high inquiry. Advocacy means clearly expressing one's point of view and the reasoning behind it. Inquiry means exploring and questioning one's own reasoning and the reasoning of others. Combining high advocacy with high inquiry means (1) clearly stating what one means or believes, (2) making the reasoning behind one's beliefs as open to scrutiny as possible, (3) attempting to genuinely understand the reasoning of others and see the sense in it and (4) inviting others to question one's own reasoning. Combining advocacy with inquiry often requires a conscious effort to suspend judgment, experience doubt, and accept a degree of uncertainty until a new understanding is achieved (Dewey, 1938). It involves openness to seeing the reason in other ways of thinking and to discovering inconsistencies or gaps in one's own reasoning so as to facilitate learning and change on all sides.

Negotiating reality can be particularly difficult when intercultural communication involves conflicting goals, particularly when one side feels that the other presents a threat to its deeply held needs, values, or beliefs.

Feelings of threat or uncertainty often push emotional buttons that lead to polarization, escalation, and entrenchment. Goal conflicts are often considered intractable because goals and interests are regarded as given and inaccessible to rational deliberation. Negotiating reality, however, makes goals an object of inquiry by asking: “*Why* do you feel so strongly, so passionately, about the goals you hold?” The power of *why* is that it enables people to give voice to the underlying assumptions, needs, values and belief that drive their behavior and invest it with so much emotional force (Friedman, Rothman & Withers, 2006). The *why*-question touches on people's identities and how they define themselves relative to and in relationships with others. Openly asking self and others this question enables people to hear and appreciate the concerns and commitments of others. At the same time, it provides opportunities for people to reflect on and question their own goals and assumptions. At the very least, it provides a basis for all sides to think seriously about how they can meet their needs in ways that enable others to meet theirs.

It is rare for people to stop and openly ask these kinds of questions in intercultural situations. A critical skill, therefore, in negotiating reality is knowing when and how to interrupt one's automatic functioning and to engage in an inquiry process aimed at bringing individual and aggregate theories of action into awareness. Here too, driving provides a useful analogy. When a car goes into a skid, people's automatic reaction is to slam on the breaks and turn away from the skid. However, this natural, automatic reaction not only fails to solve the problem, but (at least before ABS) makes things worse, causing the car to spin completely out of control. People experience a similar kind of “skid” in interactions with others. For examples, when people confront resistance to their way of seeing or doing things, they typically focus on changing their action strategies: How am I going to achieve my goal? How am I going to convince these people that they are wrong? How am I going to overcome resistance? As a consequence, they repeat their arguments more forcefully or attempt to manoeuvre the other into accepting their position. These action strategies quite frequently produce just the opposite effect, for example, more resistance and less understanding on both sides. However, when people feel they are getting into a skid, they can interrupt it by beginning to negotiate reality.

Negotiating reality goes beyond engaging intercultural communication conflict at the interpersonal level. The theory of action construct can also be applied at the field level, whether it involves a group, organization, community, or society, or any other configuration of social space (Argyris & Schon, 1974, 1978, 1996). In this sense, culture (in the first wave sense)

can be conceived of as a collective theory of action and analyzed using this conceptual tool (e.g. Friedman & Desivilya, 2010; Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Friedman, Razer & Sykes, 2004). Using theories of action as an analytical tool makes it possible to trace the links between individual theories of action and the collective spaces that we construct together. It enables people to see specific ways in which their reasoning and action shape the collective theory of action and how this collective theory constrains and shapes their reasoning and action.

## **Negotiating Reality as Researching Intercultural Communication**

I began this paper by revisiting my own theoretical turbulence as a graduate student in the field of cross-cultural psychology. The idea of intercultural communication as jointly constructing social space has helped me make sense of this turbulence and work my way through it as a practitioner and a researcher. Therefore, I wish to take this approach one step further and conclude this chapter with some thoughts about the role of research in intercultural communication.

Negotiating reality is based on action science (Argyris et al., 1985; Friedman, 2001; Friedman & Rogers, 2008), a form of action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) that turns the researcher and practitioner relationship on its head. Researchers usually see their role as observers of intercultural communications, standing on the outside for the purpose of generating empirically sound knowledge that can be applied by practitioners so as to be more effective. In the process of negotiating reality, however, practitioners are actually researchers of their own practice. Whenever people communicate inter-culturally they are testing tacit theories about how to work effectively with others. Action, then, can be seen as a series of experiments to test our tacit theories. If the interaction goes smoothly, the theory seems to be confirmed. If something goes wrong, any component of the theory (i.e. the initial conditions, the action strategy, or the desired outcome) can be revised in order to achieve a more desirable outcome.

As illustrated above, negotiating reality makes this everyday process of theory building and testing explicit and self-critical. Rather than simply explaining away difficulties in intercultural communication, negotiating reality obliges people to turn obstacles and problems into objects of inquiry (i.e. research questions). However, as discussed earlier, it is very difficult for people to interrupt their automatic reactions and engage in inquiry. Rather, they are more likely to change their action strategies while