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Core Intercultural Conflict Communication Practices: Insights from Diverse Fields

ABSTRACT

A more interconnected world means more potential conflict marked by culturally grounded misunderstandings, meta-conflict over the rules of engagement, identity-based judgments, and challenges to existing power structures. Communication education devoted to core intercultural conflict communication practices represents one path for addressing these challenges. This paper provides a preliminary review of educational sources in diverse fields that address the core practices people can employ in managing intercultural conflict. These fields include intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence, emotional intelligence, listening, conflict management and negotiation, and mediation and facilitation. From these streams, four core practices appear central to managing intercultural conflict. At the more specific, behavioral level, they include listening and assertion. At the strategic level, they include negotiating and facilitating. A fifth practice of adaptability provides the crucial element of ongoing learning. Important questions remain concerning the generalizability and evaluation of these practices. Nevertheless, they represent important subjects for university-level curricula in communication.

Keywords: Intercultural, Conflict, Competence, Listening, Asserting, Negotiation

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INTRODUCTION

In an era of intensified globalization and interdependence, travel, migration and relocation, spurred and shaped by political, economic, and technological upheavals, we are more likely than ever to engage with others from different backgrounds. With increased global diversity, boundaries between cultures become less clear and cultural identities become more complex and nuanced (Arasaratnam 2014). Whether one sees a shrinking, diversifying world more as opportunity or as threat, it is a reality; there is no turning back from increasing interconnection. Having more interactions with others from different backgrounds suggests greater potential for conflict rooted in misunderstanding. It suggests greater potential for conflict in which people may hold divergent, often taken-for-granted assumptions about how to manage conflict, producing additional frustrations (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001, p. 17). It increases the potential for conflict shaped by and reflecting distinctive group identities, with category-based prejudices and animosities

framing how we understand our differences (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel 2001, p. 19). It may mean new challenges to existing power orders (including patriarchies) and status quo aspects of relationships.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that communication rooted in nonviolence rather than the logics of dominance and submission can positively transform relationships, workplaces, and societies (Rosenberg 2015). Education devoted to these ideals supports the aim of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 (United Nations Development Programme 2019) to reduce all forms of violence. We need to develop greater awareness of the ways we deal with each other. We need skilful communication promoting mutual understanding, nonviolent conflict management, relationship enrichment, and tolerance for distinctive identity expression. The need for effective, ethical interpersonal practices applicable to intercultural conflict situations grows more evident and urgent.

What are the core communicative practices that centrally contribute to effective, ethical cross-cultural interpersonal communication and promote just, nonviolent relationships? This paper offers an initial foray into several scholarly and applied fields in search of congruence regarding specific communicative practices that can translate into teaching and learnable skills. The following sections provide an initial overview of practices identified by scholars, teachers and practitioners in intercultural communication competence, interpersonal communication competence, emotional intelligence, listening, conflict and negotiation, and mediation and facilitation. In each section, I will describe a bit about approaches and address key identified practices applicable to intercultural conflict situations. A synthesis of the reviewed areas leads to a model identifying five core practices; two describe specific actions, two characterize strategic guiding of courses of action, and one captures an overarching orientation to the others.

I intend this as a brief dip into several pools, not a comprehensive literature review. The practices identified here could inform learning goals for courses or programs emphasizing communication in global or cross-cultural conflict environments. As a professor and former administrator at a communication college, I have particular interest in curricular development. Guided by that purpose, in this discussion I draw in part on textbooks and handbooks that represent distillations of research in different fields. I come to these texts as a curious reader. My own scholarly grounding is in communication, with distinctive emphasis in language and social interaction. I hope that this review invites readers' reflection on how different fields and literatures may show congruence in the practices they identify. The closing discussion raises questions designed to stimulate ongoing development of these ideas.

INSIGHTS FROM DIVERSE FIELDS

Intercultural Communication Competence

There remains wide variation in how scholars conceptualize and operationalize intercultural communication competence (see Deardorff 2009; Griffith et al. 2016). One recent literature review found that many studies operationalize intercultural competence simply as having studied abroad, begging the question of what one learns or is able to do because of such experiences (Arasaratnam 2015). A common approach, however, involves consideration of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components, with outcomes linked to effectiveness (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). Chen (2014) adds a moral component,

indexing orientation to the norms and values that guide intercultural interactions. The cognitive component may include critical awareness and ability to integrate perspectives. Affective components may include open-mindedness, appreciation, and empathy or "cultural empathy": (Dinges and Baldwin 1996, p. 109; Arasratnam 2014).

An early emphasis on traits gave way to identifying communicative qualities or behaviors that correlate with successful outcomes (Dinges and Baldwin 1996, p. 107). At the more general or higher-abstract end, Byram (1997) includes linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, socio-cultural, and social dimensions of Intercultural communication competence. At the more behavioral end, scholars have linked competence to facility in such specifics as listening, conversational management, and use of nonverbal signals (Dinges and Baldwin 1996; Spitzberg & Changnon 2009; Arasaratnam 2014;). Chen (2014) highlights interaction skill, identity negotiation, rapport building, and creative tension among core intercultural communicative competencies.

What outcomes or criteria define intercultural communication competence (ICC)? One formulation defines ICC as "the acquisition and maintenance of culture-specific knowledge and skills required to: (1) function effectively within a new cultural context and/or (2) interact effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds" (Ward and Wilson 2014, p. 41). Other conceptions include such criteria as understanding, appropriateness, effectiveness, satisfaction, and productivity (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel 2001, pp. 58-59; Spitzberg & Changnon 2009) Scholars raise concerns about conceptual slippage between self-reported and other-reported perceptions of competence (Koester and Lustig 2015).

In summary, across formulations of ICC, listening appears repeatedly as a central, core practice. It links closely to empathy as understanding the meanings and subjective stances of others from different backgrounds. Among the cognitive skills, some version of adapting highlights the importance of the capacity to adjust behavior according to situation and interlocutor(s) (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). Among outcomes linked to ICC, effectiveness and ethical grounding or appropriateness (as per the moral dimension of ICC: Chen 2014) seem central.

Interpersonal Communication Competence

A related research tradition concerns what constitutes interpersonal competence. For this discussion, I draw on Spitzberg and Cupach's (2011) comprehensive review. Research has demonstrated how interpersonal skills help develop human relationships, promote individual achievement, nurture psychological well-being, and even enhance personal health. Research findings also indicate that a significant percentage of the population needs, and nearly all people would benefit from enhanced interpersonal skills. Spitzberg and Cupach's model of interpersonal competence includes cognition, motivation, and skills, with skills arrayed hierarchically from simpler, more microscopic (e.g., head nod) to more complex and abstract (e. g., showing interest). The criteria people consider important to good interpersonal communication have varied across millennia and situations, from appropriateness to politeness, from efficacy to ethical grounding. In contemporary studies, major criteria for judging interpersonal competence include fidelity, satisfaction, efficiency, effectiveness, appropriateness, and ethical outcomes. Distilling from these, a combination of appropriate and effective seems essential (Spitzberg & Cupach 2011, p. 498), while taking into account different relational, situational, and functional contexts.

If appropriate and effective suggest generalizable criteria for interpersonal competence, what core practices might generalize across situations? Among the many concepts by which scholars have operationalized interpersonal competence, two practices that many consider essential are assertiveness and empathy (Spitzberg and Cupach 2011, p. 500). With attention then to appropriate and effective communication, emphasizing assertiveness and empathy, we turn to literature that treats these concepts as components of emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence

First formulated by Daniel Goleman (Goleman 2006), emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the "individual's capability to perceive, express, understand and regulate their emotional responses both within themselves and in others" (Dong 2007). EI links to personality traits such as motivation, achievement, flexibility, happiness, and self-respect (Roman and Roman 2017). It underpins social competence, particularly in leadership roles. Leaders with high EI "generate excitement, enthusiasm, and optimism in the work environment and are said to be able to maintain an atmosphere of cooperation and trust through the development of high quality interpersonal relations" (Zeidner, Matthews & Roberts 2004, p. 387). Furthermore, "emotional intelligence is the sine qua non of leadership…Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won't make a great leader" (Goleman 1998 pp.93-102).

Key components of EI include:

- Self-awareness of how one's own emotions affect thoughts and behavior and of one's own strengths and weaknesses; confidence.
- Self-management to control impulsive thoughts and behavior and assess feelings; ability to put aside personal feelings and deal with a situation rationally.
- Social awareness to understand other people's emotions, needs and concerns; comfort in social situations.

Relationship management: communicating effectively, inspiring and encouraging people, working well in a team, managing groups effectively (Vezhavan and Sivasubramaniam, 2013 p. 638). Self-awareness and self-management address personal competence, while social awareness and relationship management concern social competence. In particular, the third component (social awareness) points to empathy as accomplished centrally through listening. Perhaps most directly linked to the fourth component (relationship management), an emotionally intelligent person can effectively communicate goals, ideas and intentions in an assertive manner. These qualities make emotionally intelligent people effective in situations involving conflict management and (more generally) interpersonal communication (Hocker and Wilmot 2018). The social competencies needed to make a person emotionally intelligent would also aid people in adapting to different cultural backgrounds and traits, hence contributing to effective, appropriate communication in intercultural conflict situations.

Listening

While there is widespread agreement that listening is important, it gets less attention than speaking. Furthermore, as a concept, listening suffers from lack of theoretical coherence. It overlaps and gets framed within related notions such as empathy, immediacy, expressiveness, interaction management, alter-centrism, and adaptation and coordination

(Bodie 2012). Despite these limitations, there is general agreement that competence in listening includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Bodie 2012, p. 115) – similar to intercultural and interpersonal communication competence.

One core set of practices advocated across many sources fall under the label of active listening. Often credited to the humanistic psychotherapeutic approach of Carl Rogers (1961, pp. 330-337), active listening receives common mention in interpersonal communication and conflict management instruction (e.g., Lewicki, Barry, and Saunders 2010, pp. 192-194; Jandt 2017, p. 15). However, there is scant empirical evidence of its effectiveness (Bodie 2012, p. 113). Proceeding with caution, we can identify the following practices as contributing to active listening (Hoppe 2006):

- Pay Attention (and show that you are paying attention): frame of mind, body language, attending to other.
- Hold Judgment: withhold offering advice or solution; practice (demonstrate) empathy; indicate open mind; acknowledge difference; be patient (slow, pause, silence)
- Reflect: Paraphrase information (brief, periodic), paraphrase emotion
- Clarify: Use open-ended questions, clarifying questions, and probing questions
- Summarize: restate core themes; ask other to summarize
- Share: your own feelings, ideas, suggestions.

The specificity of these formulations moves us from empathy, a more abstract and ambiguous notion (understood both as psychological stance and as communicative behaviour), to actual listening practices that seem vital to situations of intercultural conflict. These practices also serve as likely candidates to both accomplish and demonstrate empathy.

Conflict Management and Negotiation

Human conflict represents a core concern in many disciplines; here, I focus on a communication approach (Putnam 2006). Conflict management teaching materials emphasize the importance of analysis and strategy in light of the complexity of situations and choices (e.g., Folger, Poole, and Stutman 2013, pp. 229-243). They also emphasize specific behaviors that can translate into learnable practices; central among these are (e.g., Abigail and Cahn 2011, p. 8). A related applied tradition training in nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2015; Center for Nonviolent Communication 2019) promotes honest expression and compassionate reception of needs through four key practices: Making observations (describing perceptions), expressing and acknowledging feelings, identifying and articulating needs, and making requests. At their core, these can be understood as practices for speaking assertively and listening empathically.

Negotiation represents a distinctive although somewhat overlapping field. Some pedagogical materials position negotiation as one path for managing conflict situations involving interdependence and incompatible goals (e.g., Lewicki, Barry, and Saunders 2010, pp. 4-22). In this view, negotiation represents a mid-range engagement approach between fight (domination) or flight (avoidance or capitulation). One widely-used approach, integrative negotiation (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011), advocates a middle ground between hard bargaining and soft accommodation. It emphasizes pursuing agreement over more far-reaching goals such as relationship transformation. It presumes (and encourages nurturing) a relatively level playing field between participants, with the key concept of BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) calling attention to

power dynamics. The collaborative negotiation approach casts its guidelines primarily at a relatively abstract, strategic level. The four key principles call for negotiators to: Separate the people from the problem, Focus on interests, not positions, Invent options for mutual gain, and Insist on using objective criteria. Within the first of these, separating the people from the problem, there is some attention to specific communication skills, centering on listening and effectively conveying one's own interests (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 2011, pp. 36-39). Specific to intercultural conflict, Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001 pp. 179-195) list among constructive conflict skills mindful observation, mindful listening, mindful reframing, identity validation, facework management, productive power balancing, collaborative dialogue, problem-solving skills, transcendent discourse, and interaction adaptability. In these, there is attention both to specific behavioural practices (speaking and listening) and more process-oriented, strategic skills that attend to face, power, and problem solving. Again, adaptability emerges as a central skill area.

Mediation and Facilitation

The practices considered thus far attend primarily to one's own behavior. There may be value in expanding the discussion to consider core practices for guiding or helping as a third party in intercultural conflict situations (see, for example, Moore and Woodrow 2010, pp. 407-433). In particular, mediation and facilitation appear among a broad range of ways third parties can help disputing parties manage differences, pursue agreements, and accomplish their tasks (Ury 2000). Different philosophies of mediation foreground different primary objectives, from interest-based agreement to relationship transformation to promoting social justice (Hocker and Wilmot 2018; Jandt, 2017). Mediation generally refers to a formal process in restricted environments; however, informal mediation practices prove relevant in many organizational and personal situations. The term facilitation gets used less consistently to encompass a more restricted process-guiding role as well as performing such tasks for small and large groups. In addition to active listening, mediation and facilitation skills involve guiding process, agenda-setting, selectively intervening, framing and reframing. They also involve refraining from solving problems, judging right or wrong or displaying preference for one party's position over another (McCorkle and Reese 2019)

Synthesis

These fields offer diverse perspectives on what might constitute core interpersonal practices in intercultural conflict situations. Alongside primary focus on practices translatable into specific behaviors, I have also included those representing courses of action: the former perhaps more analogous to tactics, and the latter to strategies. At the more specific, behavioral end, two sets of skills are essential to effective, ethical communication in conflict among parties from different cultural backgrounds. They are listening and asserting. At the strategic level, negotiating and facilitating capture the importance of guided overall courses of interaction, whether one is a party to a conflict or helping others manage their conflicts. They correspond to what Byram (1997) identified as the sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, socio-cultural, and social dimensions of ICC. They embody the social awareness and relationship management competencies identified as part of emotional intelligence. They resonate with the four core principles of collaborative negotiation. Finally, adapting seems crucial to add, capturing the importance of fitting these practices to situation, context, and relationship and suggesting the importance of ongoing, lifelong learning.

The elements then include:

- Asserting: identifying and expressing responsibly one's own perceptions, emotions, and concerns; asking for what one wants; advocating clearly, persuasively, and respectfully; refraining from personal attacks and verbal violence.
- Listening: understanding others and letting them know that you understand; empathizing; comprehending; withholding judgment; using behaviors such as inquiry and paraphrasing that both enhance and demonstrate active listening.
- Negotiating: collaboratively managing conflicts; constructive power balancing; reconciling incompatible goals; creating agreements that meet all parties' interests.
- Facilitating: leading disputing parties and groups to mutually satisfactory decisions and collective action. Helping: as a third party providing coaching, resources, or assistance.
- Across all of these, adapting presents an overlaid core practice enabling communication experts to work effectively across differences, cultural settings, and situations.
- Here then, is a model of core practices, informed by literature from these different areas.

DISCUSSION

To what extent are these universal core interpersonal communication practices? To what extent might they, or the ways people formulate them, vary across languages and cultures (cf. Arasaratnam and Doerfel 2005)? Arguably, assertive practices make sense within a low-context framework in which participants will explicitly state what they observe, need, or want. However, assertiveness in a more high-context environment might come across as overly aggressive or lacking subtlety. As Hammer (2005) argues, directness/indirectness represents a crucial dimension for understanding approaches to managing intercultural conflict. Similarly, active listening is one matter when the other party is speaking openly; it is quite another when one needs to attend to silence, indirectness, or subtle nonverbal cues. Nevertheless, these identified practices offer promise of at least partial generalizability. To the extent that they are so, that may be because, as one negotiation scholar sees it, "in our era of globalization it's also true that we have more in common on the person-to-person level than you might expect." (Susskind 2004, p. 4).

What are the current best practices and challenges related to assessing, teaching and learning these core practices (see Fantini 2009)? Each field referenced above contains considerable pedagogical wisdom; scholars in these fields acknowledge the challenges in teaching and assessing outcomes. Bringing these disparate literatures into contact may help generate advances. For example, asserting and listening tend to get treated separately. In actual conflict interaction, however, they deeply inter-twine. Among these practices, adapting seems less clearly linkable to specific communicative behaviors. It represents to some extent a cognitive capacity to read cues, interpret, and alter one's own actions and courses of action. New conceptualizations of the practices may help guide more robust methods for teaching and assessing them.

Who should learn and study these core practices? I would wish for these to be taught or at least taken seriously among all people. As an intriguing parallel, I note the project conceived by the Dalai Lama as a "map of our emotions to develop a calm mind" and developed by psychologists Paul Ekman and Eve Ekman (Atlas of Emotions) as an attempt

to promote widespread learning about universal human feelings. Short of educating the whole of humanity, one starting point is communication students, whose careers may involve managing transnational media campaigns and guiding global organizations in fields such as politics, sports, entertainment, journalism, public relations, government, and NGOs. In such fields, people often work in teams and groups and engage with fast-changing, complex, culturally diverse audiences. While communication curricula often help students develop expertise in audience analysis, message creation, and campaign management, they may give less attention to developing students' own communication practices. Too often we educators take for granted that students know how to do these things well, or that doing so represents clear, simple practice. Ironically, other professional fields such as medicine, law, or business sometimes give greater attention to developing related competences. For such emerging professionals in communication, is competence the best goal? Does that term convey a sense of minimal expectations? Should communication experts aspire to a higher level of achievement than competence – perhaps "excellence"?

The need for intercultural communication competence rises alongside increases in migration, global mobility and accessibility to technology. Research and education in intercultural communication competence remain vital (Arasaratnam 2015). In particular, there is great value and promise in helping students develop core practices that will help them manage intercultural conflict situations. They already engage and will engage more in the future with people from different stances and cultural backgrounds. Their enhanced intercultural communication expertise should reduce misunderstandings while promoting greater self-awareness. Competency in these practices should facilitate individual success as well as contributing to the productive operation of diverse groups, teams, and workplaces. Even more promising, at their best these practices can enrich human relationships, contributing in their humble way to just, peaceful survival on this small planet.

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