INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND DISABILITIES FROM A COMMUNICATION COMPLEX PERSPECTIVE

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Intercultural communication presents a number of challenges that are less of an issue in same-culture interactions. This is important because travel and technological capability enable more and more immigrants, business people, tourists, etc. to engage in such interactions. One group of people that comprises 10% of the world population, the disabled, is increasingly being mainstreamed within cultures as well as traveling to other countries. Research finds that the disabled are often marginalized and discriminated against within their own country. When the abled enter an intercultural interaction with the disabled the communication challenges are even greater. Communication Complex, a metatheoretical perspective on communication that embraces a constitutive definition of communication combined with a neuroscience understanding of interaction, offers a deeper, yet highly practical explanation of the level of complexity that such an encounter entails. This article offers a brief introduction to this way of understanding intercultural communication, along with the suggestion that future studies and practical guides should take disabilities into account when analyzing or building skills.

Key words: Intercultural communication, intercultural interaction, communication complex, metatheoretical perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Challenges faced in communication vary according to context. Put another way, communication is a complex undertaking, even though we often think of it in an overly simple way (Parrish-Sprowl, 2014a, 2014b, 2013, 2012, Parrish-Sprowl, S and Parrish-Sprowl, J, 2014). For example, two long-term friends, from the same community and culture, discussing a favorite subject in the comfort of their home may find communication to be fluid and easy. However, individuals from different countries, ones with a history of animosity, may find a conversation on a similar topic to be more work, frustrating, and possibly it could be deadly. Quite simply, adding to the complexity of the communication process, intercultural interaction holds potential pitfalls that are absent from within-culture conversation.

Often, in within culture conversation, we also find communication between the abled and the disabled to hold similar difficulties. People often do not know how to manage the issue of disability in a conversation. People might wonder how to talk to a person in a wheelchair without seeming to look down on them in the pejorative sense, or how to go about interaction with the deaf and blind in a way that does not feel disconcerting. These conversations can be smooth, if we learn how to do so, or they can be awkward or even offensive if we do not. The range of disabilities, including mobility, sight, sound, and mental impairments just adds to the challenge to develop capable communication skills.

To complicate matters even more, if we add to the intercultural communication context, one or more persons with a disability, a layer of complexity rarely discussed but growing in frequency, adds to the effort needed to communicate effectively. While a large and ever increasing literature on intercultural communication exists that blends theory, research and practice (see, for example, Gonzalez and Chen, 2015; Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2011), as is the case for communication and disabilities (See, for example, Braithwaite, D.O. and Thompson, T. 1999), the research literature combining the two is nearly nonexistent, with the exception of the treatment of a disability as a cultural category by itself (such as deaf culture). To address the issue of intercultural communication that includes people with disabilities, this paper will first discuss why this issue is of growing importance and identifies critical concerns and practical advice, from a communication complex perspective.

GLOBALIZATION AND OPPORTUNITY

As has been noted elsewhere, globalization is a relatively new term for a process that has been continuously unfolding for centuries (Parrish-Sprowl, 2009). A number of authors share the opinion that the term was coined due to the qualitative differences of the current era (Prestowitz; 2005, Sachs, 2005). Three aspects in particular are relevant to the present discussion. First, is the development of a much more open level of interchange between people from different countries that, during the cold war, allowed scant interaction between their citizens. For example, China and the United States permitted almost no travel or correspondence between citizens during the cold war, but now China and the USA exchange thousands of students every year and China has become the largest trading partner of the USA. This openness facilitates much more intercultural communication between citizens than during the cold war or even any previous era.

Secondly, transportation between countries has become more available, both in frequency and price. It has become much easier, and considerably more affordable, for people to visit different countries than ever before and people from most nations are taking advantage of this opportunity. This increases the number of intercultural encounters that people experience, even if they do not travel but merely meet people who do. Finally, technology has enabled both increased virtual intercultural interaction as well as face-to-face conversation. The spread of the internet and the world wide web has facilitated a huge number of intercultural interactions that simply could not happen without this technology. In all, we have an unprecedented era in human history regarding intercultural contact.

With increased cross-cultural exchanges, the issues and concerns arising from communication have grown exponentially. Now, not only do diplomatic leaders need to be versed in intercultural interaction, so do countless people in business, education, and the leisure travel industry. Included in this growth in exchange is an increasing number of people with mobility, visual, hearing, and other impairments who travel and/or meet those who do, thus enabling them to participate in intercultural interaction in numbers historically unprecedented. This change adds to the complexity of intercultural communication, in part because many cultures still grapple with such interactions within, and at the same time it adds a dimension that demands even greater skill among the participants in a conversation.

DISABILITIES AND DISADVANTAGE

According to the WHO, around 10% of the global population is disabled in some way, making them the world's largest minority (http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/facts.shtml). Furthermore, in nearly every country, people with disabilities are more likely to be undereducated, under or unemployed, and are often considered to be the most disadvantaged people in the community. As a consequence, many people, regardless of ethnic culture or nationality, do not develop a facility for effectively interacting with those we label disabled. From a communication perspective, we might consider this inability to be a type of disability itself. The discomfort and lack of experience that many have when communicating with those who are impaired, creates its own set of problems, ones that often foster insensitivity, cruelty, and discrimination. This is sometimes accidental and sometimes purposeful.

In many places, people often assume that being disabled also means that a person lacks intellectual capacity as well. This is fueled by education systems that often either do not or are inadequate in accommodating varying disabilities, leaving those who are hearing impaired, blind, or wheel chair bound either in special schools, segregated from others, or out of school altogether. Given such circumstances, it is extremely difficult for everyone to develop function and effective communication skills to cross the impairment boundaries. This is slowly changing, but it will be several years before those who are disabled are routinely mainstreamed in education and work environments in all countries. However, because this is happening, it is increasingly possible for a person to be in a position to communicate across the impairment divide, both within and across cultures. As a consequence, it is worth considering how we might best develop the skills to create positive and effective interaction in such situations.

COMMUNICATION COMPLEX: A REFRAMING OF SKILL

Definitions of communication number well over one hundred with some that are highly similar and others that are quite different and even mutually exclusive. For example, some consider communication to be an intentional act, something that we choose to do or not, while others believe that it can be unintentional because all behavior is infused with meaning and thus interpreted as part of the meaning making process. How one defines communication matters greatly if we are considering providing advice for how one should develop communication skills. In recent years, a growing number of communication scholars have begun to view communication as more than a process of information exchange, one where crafting a great message is the centerpiece of skill development. The shift has been to one that focuses on the conversation between people and the dynamics of the interchange between those engaged in a reflexive process of constructing social reality (See The Coordinated Management of Meaning in Pearce, 2007).

This body of theory and research alters the conception of skill, it is more than the ability to clearly speak, one must consider how the conversation might unfold and how this dynamic can strengthen or undermine relationships and identities. Thus skill is more about creating good conversation than about great messages. The development

of an approach called Communication Complex builds on this thinking, but also draws on neuroscience research that increasingly demonstrates the physiological defining aspects of interaction, such that it both creates our ability to communicate and simultaneously our communication creates and shapes physiology (Hasson et al, 2012; Cozolino, 2014). While a number of ways have been developed to help us understand the intricacies of communication as a reflexive process, Communication Complex, as a meta theory, draws upon the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce, 2007) and Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) (Siegel, 2010) to establish a way of explaining how interaction literally is shaped by and shapes us (Parrish-Sprowl, 2014, 2013, 2012).

Communication Complex offers a practical approach to engaging some key ideas and research in an effort to enable us to more effectively approach our daily interactions, especially when they present intricate difficulties. Communication Complex directs us to consider brain activity and other body experiences in our analysis of communication and as a guide to improved interaction. In addition, it draws on concepts from theories that are predicated on the reflexive nature of conversation that directs us to consider skill in a different way than we traditionally have done. For example, one useful set of terms that we can take from CMM is resources and practices. Basically, to engage in communication we need some resources to construct what we say to each other. These resources include the vocabulary and stories we use to express our self and make meaning with each other.

Practices are the engagement of resources in the act of conversing with each other. For example, sometimes we know what to say (resources) and just how to say it (practices), making our conversation move forward in a seemingly effortless way. Other times, we know what we want to say (resource) but do not know how to say it (practice) which can be frustrating. Everyone has, at various times in their life, not known what to say at a given moment (lack of resources), or wanted to say just the right thing in the right way but could not figure out how to do it (not skilled in the necessary practices) making us feel awkward. This is especially the case at difficult moments, such as an intercultural interaction with someone whose culture is at odds with our own or when meeting a person with an impairment for the first time. Imagine such a situation as a really important job interview, when we must talk with the family of someone who just died, or any situation that demands that we communicate with great skill and care in situations that we do not routinely face or where we are not comfortable.

How we conduct ourselves when talking with each other, especially when there are difficulties, depends, in part, on our orientation to communication. One of the most difficult shifts we need to make regarding our interactions with others; is to consider it as a co-constructing process rather than simply a vehicle to convey a message from one person to another. This is partly the case because most people live in nations, if not cultures, that hold as central, the notion of each of us is a separate individual, rather than as individuals who are systemically interconnected. Making this more complicated, is the pervasiveness of psychological language that suggests that cognition, thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, etc., are developed within the individual mind, not in interpersonal communication, despite a growing body of neuroscience research to the contrary (Cozolino,

2014; Hasson et al. 2012; Siegel, 2012). Indeed, the evidence suggests that identities, including that of being disabled, relationships, families, communities, and cultures are reflexively shaped by, and shaping of, communication.

IPNB aggregates a large amount of neuroscience research, as does Cozolino (2014) indicating that we are not born with a set of resources and practices; we learn them. Primary sources for both are family, other early childhood caregivers, friends, media, and schools. As we learn them, they become patterns of neural firing in our brain, forming something like a map. When someone says something we engage our brain maps to make sense out of it. One of the things that we have learned from research in neuroscience is that we have the ability to constantly develop new brain maps. What this means is that while we have a tendency to get stuck in patterns of thought and action, we are capable of change, if we choose to work at it. Thus each person has the ability to develop and practice new ways of interacting with people that make for better relationships. More importantly, everyone will have this ability for the rest of your life, barring injury or illness.

This has two important implications for intercultural communication and disabilities. First, it is important for people to remember that at any given point in their life, through accident, violence, or disease, they could join the group known as the disabled. We have only modest control of this possibility. However, because our brains can constantly rewire, we can learn to interact in new ways that enable us to continue to have productive and satisfying lives. For example, imagine that a person loses their hearing due to a loud noise or an injury. They are fully capable of developing new ways of listening and responding in conversation; enabling them to effectively function in a world where hearing is expected. In turn, the people in their life are also fully able to develop new ways of listening and responding to them. With the concepts of resources and practices, and a little knowledge of the brain and human interaction (all resources), we can examine how the communication between others and the hearing impaired can evolve into effective, functional skill (the practices).

Secondly, when encountering people from different cultures, with or without impairments, everyone is capable of developing new resources and practices that can overcome the awkwardness and misunderstandings that can arise from such situations. In other words, people can learn or be trained to improve their performance throughout the lifespan. As people develop new insights into how things might be understood in such interactions they can make different choices regarding how to talk into such situations. This fosters improved practices, and, in turn, better and more productive interaction.

For example, simple statements can mean different things, depending on a person's resources. If, when encountering someone with a different background or abilities, saying, "I understand" their situation or how they feel is more complex than people often consider. In one way, to understand is to comprehend an idea or concept. A person can understand what discrimination or stereotypes are and why they are not helpful to bridge the gap in an intercultural interaction. This form of understanding we can associate with left-brain oriented processing, which is to say it relies more on reasoning and language than lived experience. In another way, we can "understand" discrimination in a visceral, emotional way. Someone on the receiving end can literally feel it, leading them to say and do

things in reaction to such talk. Understanding in this sense typically requires individuals to actually experience the receiving end of discrimination. When they do, that person will feel their reaction throughout the entire body. For example, imagine that a Russian who is hearing impaired goes to Germany and is treated badly because the people they encounter think that the Russian is rude when they do not respond because they cannot hear. This could be very upsetting. This type of understanding is quite different than a conceptual understanding, and tends to be more associated with right-brain oriented processing. If people learn (resources) that "understanding", in communication, can unfold in different ways, then they can make better choices regarding the people they encounter, reducing the number of miscues that can arise. That is not to say that either way is exclusively left or right brain in processing; nothing is, but our way of making meaning in these examples tends to orient more one way than the other.

Imagine, then, if a person with a conceptual understanding of culture, disability, or both, says to the person with an experiential understanding "I understand how you feel". The person whose resources are developed through lived experience may well be off put, upset, or even angry by the declaration of understanding, while the conceptual person may be perplexed or even react with anger when the other thinks they do not understand. It is easy to see how this simple speech act, honestly put forth by two people in an intercultural conversation, can lead to a really problematic misunderstanding. What might have begun as an encounter meant to be friendly and enjoyable, can sometimes turns out not to be, and may even disintegrate into an ugly, invective filled, conversation. This is an unfortunate turn of events, especially if everyone began the conversation with good intentions.

When an individual has never encountered a person from a particular culture, especially one that is disabled, then they may not have resources to interact that move beyond a conceptual way. For many, encountering people from other cultures is a novel, not routine, experience. In addition, an individual may also have rather limited experience talking with the disabled. They may believe it was wrong to discriminate, but quite honestly, not know enough about how to talk with someone in a wheel chair or who is deaf to even know what ways of communicating might create the conditions for discrimination. Part of the problem with discrimination is that sometimes people do it on purpose, but probably more often it is conveyed unwittingly via the assumptions made about the other person. Once a person begins to develop the resources and practices built from routine interaction with those who are different, their entire understanding may well change.

At first it can feel awkward, leading to an array of negative feelings, including anger, frustration, confusion, and sometimes a deflated sense of spirit. For the person that is at the receiving end of discrimination, unwitting or not, it is an emotional assault on the person that is difficult to describe. This is a new way of understanding (a new resource) that has the potential to impact how one converses with others. However, what we want to avoid, based a communication complex understanding (a set of resources), is to have conversations that can work through the barriers and obstacles present in intercultural interaction, with or without disabilities. This required new resources and practices if conversations are to be functional, helpful, and encouraging.

This can be accomplished if we consider engaging, for example, a third possible way of interpreting the phrase "I understand"; one that is more of a left-right brain integrated orientation, one that encompasses both the conceptual and experiential dimensions of understanding. This understanding includes both a conceptual framing, along with a recognition that experience shapes our neural patterns, such that it alters "understanding" in a way that is fundamental and meaningful, apart from the logical/rational way we might understand it. If a person has not been subjected to discrimination, but at least recognizes and acknowledges that such experience is an important dimension of "understanding" it, then the conversation has the potential to unfold in a very different way, one that both participants can find more satisfying and less awkward.

In a practical sense, developing a set of communication skills (or practices) that facilitates meaning making and understanding from a Communication Complex perspective, despite cultural and/or disability differences among the participants, can lead to a good conversation. Such skills are easy to learn, not difficult to use, but they can make a big difference in how conversations, relationships, and identities are created. It is the case, that it is not only what one says, but also how they say it. When people learn about communication one aspect always included is a recognition that both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of messages exist. However, people do not always extend this into a whole body experience; one that recognizes that the way that our brain processes interaction and how our body reacts is critically important in meaning making. Yet, often people do not consider even simple adjustments to the way they talk, although they would be more effective if they do so.

It is important that people understand that communication is a reflexive process that simultaneously creates brain structure and meaning, and thus recognizing that we are best off when we mutually work to improve the quality of our conversation. Now, consider the intercultural interaction that includes a person with impairment; to frame the complexity of skill required to engage effectively in the encounter. In the following example, imagine a conversation with a person from the USA who is hearing impaired and a person from Russia who is not. Each could do something like the following:

Both the Russian and the US person:
♦ Be wary of stereotypes, they are often inaccurate or completely wrong.
♦ Recognize that language differences can lead to making meaning in ways that fit a person's culture, not necessarily in the same ways as the other person's culture.
♦ Spend time listening to the other and not simply speaking. The resources gained will improve practices. Listening is a critical communication skill.

Person from the USA:
♦ Getting close enough to the person from Russia so that it is possible to hear.
♦ Try to talk in an environment that is not overly noisy.
♦ Inform their Russian friend that they are hearing impaired so that he or she can understand why the US person has difficulties that are greater than understanding accents or cultural differences.
♦ Repeating what the Russian has said so as to receive affirmation that the meaning is understood as the Russian had hoped it would be.
♦ The US person must continue to look at the Russian face so that they can use the visual cues to augment language.

Skills for the Russian Participant:

♦ Once they know the person from the US is hearing impaired, they can use some kind of gesture to gain attention, alerting the person that they have something to say.

♦ The Russian should then wait until the US hearing-impaired person is ready to attend to what they want to say.

♦ Affirm the US person's response, or indicate it is off, since they cannot hear well, the Russian can assist by gently correcting misunderstandings.

♦ The Russian should speak in a normal cadence, adjust volume accordingly, because exaggerated speech, both by really slow speed and too much volume, is actually more difficult to understand, not less.

♦ Recognize that hearing impairment does not mean intellectually inept. It means that taking in and processing what the Russian said and what the person from the US thinks they heard is a slower process, but not necessarily one that indicates a slow intellect.

♦ The Russian can also help by proactively including the US person in a group conversation by giving them the opportunity to participate. Turn to them and give them the opportunity to speak in an otherwise rapid paced conversation.

Communicating well is a challenge that we confront everyday of our lives. Some situations demand more from us than others. Due to an ever growing level of interconnectedness of the global population, it is increasingly difficult to confine our interactions with those who are just like us and to ignore all others. As a consequence, people must develop greater skill to navigate the intercultural environment, whether they travel to it or it arrives at that door. Current levels of immigration in Europe, for example, ensure the need for increased skill in intercultural interaction. In the absence of such education the world can expect increased tension both within and between communities and countries. One need only look at the sectarian strife in the Middle East to understand what can occur if we do not develop a collective facility to productively engage one another.

The treatment of people with disabilities is changing around the world, in some countries more rapidly than others. Although this is creating the conditions for policy makers to reconsider outmoded approaches to education and work opportunities for people with some type of impairment, the movement has been generally slow. As a consequence, people with disabilities are often marginalized. More specifically, as is noted in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities:

The rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in a perfect world, would be enough to protect everyone. But in practice certain groups, such as women, children and refugees have fared far worse than other groups and international conventions are in place to protect and promote the human rights of these groups. Similarly, the 650 million people in the world living with disabilities — about 10 per cent of the world's population—lack the opportunities of the mainstream population (http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/questions.shtml).

It is important to recognize that people with disabilities may need varying supports (such as elevators or sign language interpreters), however, they can generally be mainstreamed in schools, worksites, and other public spaces. By doing so, schools create

an environment where people can develop within culture skill as part of their general educational process.

Still, as the example above illustrates, intercultural encounters where disabilities are involved are a more complex undertaking than when either contextual parameter exists without the other. As we move forward in intercultural communication research and teaching, the issues around such encounters that involve people with disabilities should be acknowledged. Communication Complex offers an approach that enables an understanding of the challenges of such an encounter that has more depth and breadth than most traditional communication theories. In addition, there is a substantial amount of research that supports this approach. The example in this article is but one small insight into the possibilities that can be drawn from this theoretical framing. As the world grows increasingly more technologically saturated; along with greater travel, migration, and the interconnectedness of business, intercultural communication will be a larger part of our daily interactions. People need to become knowledgeable and skilled in this area. As they do so, it is important to not leave one of the worlds largest and most discriminated against minorities behind: those with disabilities.

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МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ И ИНВАЛИДНОСТЬ С ПОЗИЦИЙ КОММУНИКАЦИОННОГО КОМПЛЕКСА

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В контексте межкультурной коммуникации возникают проблемы, которые не столь очевидны в рамках одной культуры. Это обстоятельство значимо в связи с тем, что благодаря путешествиям и новым технологиям все более значительное число иммигрантов, предпринимателей, туристов и т.д. участвуют в подобного рода интеракциях. 10% населения мира составляют инвалиды, которые все в большей степени включаются в обычную жизнь общества и путешествуют в другие страны. Исследования доказывают, что инвалиды часто воспринимаются как маргиналы и подвергаются дискриминации в своей собственной стране. Еще большие сложности возникают при межкультурном общении здоровых людей и инвалидов. Коммуникационный комплекс — метатеоретический подход к коммуникации, объединяющий конститутивное определение коммуникации с ее нейробиологической трактовкой, — предлагает более глубокое и в то же время практико-ориентированное объяснение уровня сложности такого взаимодействия. В статье кратко анализируется данный подход к межкультурной коммуникации, предлагаются перспективы исследований, намечаются практические шаги по учету инвалидности при анализе либо отработке соответствующих коммуникативных навыков.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, межкультурная интеракция, коммуникационный комплекс, метатеоретический подход.