



Scientific Report

Expert Meeting

Towards a social psychology of intercultural communication: Processes, Barriers, Interventions

Organizers: Olivier Klein (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium), Gerald Echterhoff (Jacobs University, Germany), Karen Douglas & Robbie Sutton (University of Kent, UK)

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Summary

How does communication between members of different sociocultural groups affect intercultural relations and understanding? Given the suitability of methods and concepts of experimental social psychology, the scarcity of pertinent research is striking. The workshop brought together social psychologists from relevant fields (e.g., language, social cognition, cultural differences) to explore and coordinate perspectives for experimental investigations of intercultural communication. Particular attention was devoted to barriers for desired outcomes and to the role of communicative and linguistic factors. A key benefit is deeper insight into interventions for improving intercultural relations. The practical aim of the workshop was to elaborate an application for a European Collaborative Research Project (ECRP) which had to be submitted by March 10, 2010.

Note that the structure of the meeting is based on the structure of an ECRP which distinguishes between countries with participating funding organisations (Germany, UK, Poland, Netherlands, Dutch-speaking Belgium) and associates (French-speaking Belgium, Italy). Each presentation was followed by discussions aimed at coordinating the different proposals into a common framework.

Scientific Content

Background & Introduction (by the organizers)

Intercultural communication (ICC) has become one of the most challenging issues in today's world owing to the surge of information technology, availability of mass media, as well as long-distance travel and migration. Receiving increasing attention by researchers from various disciplines, the study of ICC has become an active field of research, characterized by rich theorizing and empirical studies of intercultural encounters. ICC is the topic of numerous scholarly articles and books (e.g., Bolten, 2007; Gudykunst, 2005a; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Lustig & Koester, 2002, Neuliep, 2009, Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010) and the focus of academic programs at many institutions.

ICC occurs when communication between individuals is affected by cultural differences (e.g., Rogers & Hart, 2002). While an abstract term like culture is notoriously difficult to define (e.g., Chiu & Hong, 2006), the literature suggests key elements of culture that are relevant to communication. These include verbal and nonverbal symbol systems (language), ways of meaning making shared by individuals within a definable population, and the customs, norms, beliefs, and values that guide their behaviour and thinking (Kashima, 2000; Neuliep, 2009; Samovar et al., 2010).

The importance of ICC is attributed largely to its fundamental role in intercultural relations. Effective and successful ICC may reduce misunderstandings between people with different cultural backgrounds and thus foster dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation (e.g., Neuliep, 2009). The mere occurrence of ICC, which has become unavoidable in today's world, might be a necessary condition for beneficial effects but it is not sufficient. This is due to several known risks and problems. ICC is assumed to involve a communication situation in which people are unfamiliar with the culture of their communication partner and thus feel uncertain about key aspects of communication, such as the meaning and interpretation of utterances and the psychological states of their interlocutor (Berger, 1992; Gudykunst, 2005b). Emphasizing such fundamental uncertainties, ICC has been characterized as communication with strangers (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Indeed, there is empirical evidence that people may feel uncertain and anxious in communication with members of a different ethnic group or culture (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Vorauer, 2006), and exit such encounters feeling cognitively and emotionally drained, frustrated, or estranged (e.g., Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

The concepts and methods of psychology are well suited to investigating the causal factors that prevent or promote desirable outcomes of ICC. When feasible, the experimental manipulation of factors assumed to influence ICC allows controlled and precise tests of causal hypotheses (for examples in cultural psychology, see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007). In contrast to the close match between the repertoire of experimental social psychology and the research desiderata, a closer inspection of extant research reveals several gaps. First of all, there is a striking scarcity of approaches from experimental (social) psychology that directly address the processes of ICC. Thus, micro-level processes have received little attention.

Further gaps become apparent when reviewing extant work in social psychology. In one prominent line of research scholars have investigated sources of conflict, bias and misunderstanding between social groups (Demoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, 2009; Klein &

Snyder, 2003; Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) and ways of overcoming these problems (e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). For instance, minimal, non-hostile interaction with an out-group member has been found to improve intergroup perceptions (Gaertner et al., 1999). However, little is known about the communicative mechanisms and factors that improve intergroup relations. Also, social psychologists have studied related phenomena mostly under the rubric of intergroup relations and have not distinguished between the intergroup and intercultural dimension of social relations. In fact, intergroup and intercultural relations are often implicitly treated as interchangeable. Thus, there is virtually no research that has attempted to examine the distinctive role of an “intercultural” mindset in communication.

1. United Kingdom proposal (Robbie Sutton & Karen Douglas)

The proposed research is designed to explore how communication processes are affected by the interplay between group and cultural membership, which are different concepts. Groups are collections of people, whereas cultures are systems of meaning, typically marked by distinguishing features such as customs, rituals, values and dress codes (Fortman & Giles, 2006). We propose two projects to test the broad hypothesis that people’s perceptions and concerns related to intercultural communication are different to those experienced in intergroup contexts. First, we examine how communication may arouse different goals and concerns depending on how the interaction is construed. Specifically, is communication perceived (and experienced) differently if communicators are placed in a situation where they are interacting with representatives from a ‘group’ or a ‘culture’? Second, we examine how people communicate information about the behaviour of cultural (versus group) representatives to investigate how representations of events are influenced by the experience of the events as intergroup or uniquely intercultural. In beginning to understand how people feel about and represent intercultural encounters, we hope to begin an extended programme of research on strategies for improving intercultural communication. That is, the way people construe and experience intercultural encounters may shape the success of such encounters.

2. Polish Proposal presented by Michal Bilewicz

Research Team: Michal Bilewicz & Miroslaw Kofta, & Denis Hilton (France)

The present project investigates the key history-related psychological constraints of intercultural communication (culturally specific emotions, identities, causal attribution preferences, linguistic forms, cognitive difficulties etc.), as well as potential ways of overcoming these constraints. The main aim of the studies (performed in Poland, France and other countries) is to develop an effective and unprejudiced way to communicate about intergroup history. It involves three components:

1. Emotional constraints of intercultural communication about the past: In the present project we will systematically study the possible emergence of anxiety in intergroup contact focusing on history across three studies conducted in Poland and France.

2. The second component will deal with the formal constraints of the communication about the past, namely: (1.) different attributions, (2.) categorizations, (3.) cognitive capabilities and (4.) linguistic forms used in such communication. The main aim of these studies is to

examine to what extent the form in which the past is presented may affect intercultural communication and relations.

3- A third line of studies will examine the impact of certain forms of social identity (e.g.: specific components of social identity, healthy and fragile group-esteem, victimized identity) on the perception of the past and, in consequence, its potential for productive intercultural communication.

3. German Proposal: Gerald Echterhoff, René Kopietz & Uli Kühnen

The proposal included two components. The first component was concerned with the creation of shared reality in intercultural communication. Thus, when and how do members of different cultural groups come to develop a common understanding of a topic? To answer this question, we rely on a paradigm commonly used to address the interplay between communication and cognition: the experimental saying-is-believing paradigm (Higgins & Rholes, 1978). Employing this paradigm allows us to identify circumstances in which communication with an audience from a different cultural group yields shared reality, i.e., a convergence between the speaker's and the audience's evaluative inner states about the target. A key characteristic of ICC is *uncertainty* about key communication parameters (Berger, 1992; Gudykunst, 2005), including common ground (Clark & Brennan, 1991), the meaning of utterances, and the psychological states of the interlocutor. Drawing on recent shared-reality theory (Echterhoff, Levine, & Higgins, 2009) it is assumed that shared reality is impeded or prevented by uncertainty regarding four key conditions of shared reality, that is (1) uncertainty about the success of referential communication (aboutness, common ground), (2) uncertainty about the other's actual inner state, (3) uncertainty about the appropriateness or trustworthiness of the other person as shared reality partner, affecting the motivation/willingness to share reality, (4) uncertain experience of connecting to the other person. Existing evidence and future studies regarding these hypotheses is discussed. It is also argued that perceived intercultural differences may have different consequences than do perceived intergroup differences. We assume that people can construe the relation to a person with a different national or ethnic background along intergroup or intercultural dimensions, depending on the prevalence of an intergroup or intercultural "mindset." An intergroup mindset emphasizes the competition between the ingroup and outgroup (as in a football match between Turkey and Germany), and encourages a preferential treatment of ingroup over outgroup members (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). An intercultural mindset emphasizes the divergence of customs, beliefs, values, and verbal and nonverbal communication codes (e.g., during a German's visit in a Turkish neighbourhood), and thus should activate feelings of uncertainty about comprehension, common ground, and communication success (Chiu & Hong, 2006). Manipulations designed to reduce the above uncertainty are assumed to increase shared reality to a greater extent when intercultural (vs. intergroup) differences are salient.

The second component focuses on aspects of intercultural communication and interaction in the classroom. The way students and professors communicate and interact with each other is embedded into general learning beliefs, i.e. basic assumptions about core aspects of learning, such as what is and should be the goal of learning; what processes learning involves; what affective reactions are evoked by success and failure in learning; and what characterizes the ideal learner and teacher. Since learning beliefs are culturally shaped, faculty and students may arrive at very different interpretations of each other's behavior in

the classroom, which can be highly detrimental for their interaction and ultimately lower students' success and their subjective well-being. The purpose of the project is to examine the impact of cultural differences in learning beliefs on intercultural communication in classroom settings.

4. Dutch Proposal: Francesco Foroni & Gün Semin

The focus of this project will be how bilinguals' language competencies are embodied. Embodiment refers to a family of approaches concerned with addressing, inter alia, the sensorimotor features of language, namely how a symbolic system is grounded by multimodal experiences (e.g., Semin & Smith, 2008). The significance of differential embodiment histories given by first and second languages becomes apparent when one considers for illustrative purposes the use of taboo words in one's first and second language, a language that – let us say – has been acquired after the age of 12. Diverse studies reveal that emotional phrases generate stronger emotional responses. Other research indicates that two factors influence the electrodermal activity elicited when *bilingual* participants lie in their two languages: arousal due to emotions associated with lying, and arousal due to anxiety about managing speech production in non-native language. Thus, the main message from an embodied perspective is that the languages of multi-culturalists are likely to be embodied differentially as a function of the language acquisition history.

There are three pivotal parameters to the research we would like to conduct: 1. Differences in the embodiments of concrete and abstract concepts for bilinguals, 2. How the very same domains are grounded in the native speakers of the community and 3, how differences in grounding influence communication and under which conditions does this lead to dangerous differences in common ground between communication partners.

Belgian associate project 1: Olivier Klein

People develop perceptions of their own culture, of their audience's culture, but also of how members of their own culture are viewed by members of the other culture (for related evidence, see Klein & Azzi, 2001). These metaperceptions may influence their communication. Thus, they may drop or "translate" elements that they view as difficult to ground with their audience. They may also display cues aimed at distancing themselves from their own culture to show that they are not typical representatives of this culture. We may wonder to what extent these efforts actually succeed in the development of a shared reality with the audience. Indeed, paradoxically, these efforts could lead to negative effects: speakers may appear uninteresting or the content of their communication may sound naïve, thereby decreasing the relational and epistemic motives that should drive shared reality formation. The purpose of this project is to consider how anticipation of intercultural communication affects communicational behaviours and outcomes. Specifically we wish to consider the hypothesis that negative outcomes (e.g., misunderstanding, estrangement,...) may stem more from these expectations than from the actual experience of intercultural communication by independently manipulating the group membership of the audience (cultural in-group vs. out-group) and the expectations regarding his or her group membership. Further, we plan to consider these processes in the context of both face-to-face and electronic communication.

Associate project 2: Italy (Caterina Suitner).

Also on behalf of Andrea Carnaghi (University of Trieste) & Anne Maass (University of Padova)

Dyadic interactions between first language speaker and non-native speakers represent an ecological setting for studying inter-cultural communication. Relying on an experimental approach we seek to investigate how stereotypes and meta-stereotypes may impact on the outcome of such interactions, with a specific focus on linguistic production. We hypothesize that the accent of the non-native speaker plays a key role in shaping the communicational process and outcome, as it is one of the main cues enlightening the inter-group context. Accent, as other category-related cues, has the power to first activate the social category membership of the speakers and then, by virtue of the reiteration of such cues, to maintain the salience of the inter-group context. The importance of the accent is of primary importance in the EU context, since visual cues (such as skin colour, look, and size) are often not informative enough to differentiate members of different cultures. For example, an Italian and a French may be much more clearly differentiated in terms of their accent, even when speaking a third language, such as English, rather than on the basis of their look. Thus, within the boundaries of Europe, accent is one of the most diagnostic cues of national group membership.

In this project, the relation between stereotype activation and interaction's outcome will be investigated taking into account both the perspectives of the native and of the non-native speaker. Thus, in a first component of the project will investigate the emotional and attitudinal reactions to an outgroup member as a function of whether s/he displays an accent or not. In a second component, we will investigate non-native speakers reactions to the salience of their accent. We expect this salience to lead participants to activate meta-stereotypes and to conform to them.

Expert thoughts (Yoshihisa Kashima)

Yoshi Kashima compares two views of cultures prevailing in the social sciences: one view argues that culture is a somewhat static system of shared meaning and symbols. This is the classic view adopted in social psychology and it is well adapted to cross-cultural comparisons. The other argues that culture is a process of production and reproduction of meanings by concrete actors' activities in particular contexts in time and space. He suggests that the latter view would deserve to be more represented in social psychology and highlights how many of the projects presented in the meeting may fit in this approach. His own grounding model of cultural transmission (Kashima, Klein, & Clark, 2007) is presented as an example of this approach. Kashima considers different proposals in the context of this model. Specifically he points at the importance of integrating the *goals* of intercultural communication in any project attempting to study this phenomenon. Intercultural communication indeed needs to be considered in the context of joint activities although Yoshi Kashima acknowledges the limits of a purely collaborative model of intergroup communication. He also stresses the importance of considering some specific outcomes of intercultural communication, such as trust. In referring to the Polish Project, he argues that "shared history" could be considered as a form of common ground. With respect to the Italian project, he suggests that an accent can be viewed as a cue predicting successful performance at a joint activity. Overall, Kashima's common help delineate common theoretical threads linking the different subprojects.

Results and impact of the event on the future directions of the field

The main impact of the workshop is expected to accrue from the submission of a collaborative research project. This project was successfully submitted on March 10. It would have been extremely difficult to submit a project of this quality (at least to our eyes) without having had an opportunity to interact and coordinate the inputs of each team during the ESCON expert meeting.

If the project is funded, we can expect the following impacts on the field: Each project developed in the context of this workshop takes an innovative, distinctive approach to intercultural communication and will be conducted by researchers with excellent track records and complementary areas of expertise. The research is therefore likely to advance the burgeoning basic science on this topic on several fronts. To illustrate, the research promises to yield information about how people communicating across cultural boundaries can be more emotionally engaged and attuned, establish a stronger sense of mutual understanding, reduce intergroup tension, and achieve better educational outcomes. The project therefore addresses some fundamental social psychological questions and, accordingly, has the potential to influence academic theorising and research on this important topic. The information gained from this collaborative project is also likely to have significant impact within academia because it provides the first experimental social psychological examination of intercultural communication. It will therefore bring the topic of intercultural communication to the forefront of social psychology. The research is also likely to have impact outside academia. For example, it is likely to identify new intercultural opportunities, challenges and solutions in a range of applied settings. These findings will be of policy interest at local, national, and European level.

However, in the event that the project is not funded, the meeting will nonetheless have been a fantastic opportunity to create contacts between all participating teams and to develop collaborations in the context of their project. All teams' perspective is not only oriented to the same topic, but is also accommodated by the same overarching theoretical framework (see above). This does not only represent intellectual synergy, but has rendered the meeting particularly productive and it has actually led to collaborations.

Programme of the Meeting

Schedule

Wednesday, February 3rd

- 2.00 – 2.30pm – Welcome and introduction
- 2.30 – 3.30pm – Expert Team 1 presentation and discussion (UK)
- 3.30 – 4.00pm – Tea / Coffee
- 4.00 – 5.00pm – Expert Team 2 presentation and discussion (Poland)
- 7.30pm – Dinner at The Dolphin pub (<http://www.thedolphincanterbury.co.uk/>)

Thursday, February 4th

- Tea / Coffee available from 9.00am
- 9.30 – 10.30am – Expert Team 3 presentation and discussion (Germany)
- 10.30 – 11.30am – Expert Team 4 presentation and discussion (Netherlands)
- 11.30am – 12.30pm – Short break followed by discussion of four core team proposals
- 12.30 – 2.00pm – Lunch in Keynes College
- 2.00 – 3.00pm – Affiliate expert presentations (Belgium and Italy)
- 3.0 – 3.30pm – Tea / Coffee
- 3:30-PM- 5:30 PM- Graduate student presentations & expert thoughts from Yoshi Kashima
- 7.30pm – Dinner at the Ancient Raj Indian restaurant (<http://www.ancient-raj.com/>)

Friday, February 5th

- Tea / Coffee available from 9.00am
- 10.00am – 10.45am – Teams discuss their projects in separate groups.
- 10.45am - 12.00pm – Drafting the ECRP proposal
- 12.00am – 12.30pm – Conclusions
- 12.30pm – Lunch in Keynes College and end of meeting

Official List of participants¹:

Name	Affiliation
Michal Bilewicz	University of Warsaw
Karen Douglas	University of Kent
Gerald Echterhoff	Jacobs University, Bremen
Francesco Foroni	Free University of Amsterdam
Agnieszka Golec de Zavala	Middlesex University
Denis Hilton	University of Toulouse
Ulrich Kuehnen	Jacobs University, Bremen
René Kopietz	University College London
Yoshihisa Kashima	University of Melbourne
Olivier Klein	Université Libre de Bruxelles
Caterina Suitner	University of Padova
Robbie Sutton	University of Kent

As Mirek Kofta (University of Warsaw) and Gün Semin (Utrecht University) had to withdraw at the last minute, Agnieszka Golec de Zavala could attend.

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¹ Several graduate students, not funded by ESCON, were also allowed to attend the meeting and participate in exchange and discussions.

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