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Intercultural dialogue in theory and practice: a review

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Essay

The first decade and a half of the twenty-first century has proven very volatile for global peace and security as evidenced by numerous international and local conflicts. Increasing acts of terror, decades-long conflicts, war crimes, unresolved human rights issues, and similarly horrible crimes by humans against fellow humans demonstrate the challenges and perils of living in a multicultural world. These challenges make attempts to manage intercultural conflicts, from the macro-international to micro-interpersonal levels, seem futile. However, in recent years many political leaders, non-governmental organizations, and academics have recognized that such intercultural conflicts pose a threat not just to humans, but also to all life on earth because of the associated damage to earth's sustaining systems.

Among the different world regions, Europe – which has borne the brunt of an influx of immigrants and refugees fleeing political instability, mostly from the Middle East and Africa – has played a leading role in promoting the growth and understanding of intercultural dialogue (ICD). In the *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* published by the Council of Europe Ministers of Foreign Affairs (2008), ICD – the 'open and respectful exchange of views' – is viewed as a possible remedy for cultural, political, economic, and ideological collisions (10). The publication explored the notion of ICD and proposed a set of requirements and guidelines for facilitating the practice. Indeed, the European Union declared 2008 the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Since its conception as a possible way forward for communities living in cultural diversity and globalization, ICD has received much attention in academia, and scholarship on the concept quickly gained momentum. Not surprisingly, communication scholars have risen to the forefront of ICD scholarship, because it is through communication that individuals and groups engage in dialogue. In the three publications reviewed in this essay, the authors use ICD as a platform for articulating and advocating for different voices and ideologies. They strongly suggest that ICD be viewed as a means for promoting peace, equality, and justice across interactional contexts, and a sensible and normative way of engaging in interaction with culturally different others. Reflecting the continuing growth in understanding ICD, the authors included various indigenous perspectives specifically authored by non-Western academic scholars.

Just as instances of silence in conversation are necessary for interlocutors to engage in meaningful conversation, so will engaging in meta-dialogue about its scholarship help in

understanding ICD. Therefore, this review essay serves as a space for reflection and critical inquiry on ICD; it is designed to encourage scholars and practitioners to listen to and acknowledge the multiple voices projected in their representation of others as well as in their own scholarship. The goals of this essay are twofold: first, to review, synthesize, and critique the major trends in ICD scholarship as exemplified by the three publications; and second, to propose future directions of inquiry. This essay is not a comprehensive summary of all existing studies of the works reviewed; studies mentioned are those that contribute to the present discussion (e.g. used to illustrate certain points) and are by no means an indication of importance or rigor.

The covered studies and essays document ICD in diverse settings and geographical locations (e.g. Turkey, Rwanda, New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, Italy, India, Japan, China, etc.). The collection of works by Haydari and Holmes (2015) and articles in *Language and Intercultural Communication* special issue edited by Holmes (2014) feature nuances of culture, and the authors are highly sensitive about avoiding cultural essentialism. Works in Demenchonok (2015) are particularly critical of the excessive Westernization of the scholarship. The authors of these works are mostly academics, with a sprinkling of ICD practitioners from different countries. Within the different perspectives and diverse representations, a few commonalities can be found in the standpoints of and approaches used by the scholars to study ICD. In this essay, I explore three themes that, in my opinion, are distinctive: (a) talk in ICD as a means of expression and solution, (b) ICD as an elitist representation, and (c) ICD scholarship as a place for Western domination.

Talk in ICD as a means of expression and solution

Relying primarily on the European Council's definition of ICD, a majority of the works revealed an assumption that ICD is active, open talk that should be conducted respectfully. The ideal goal of the talk is to reconcile differences between and among participants. ICD is treated as a tool that, if used competently, can help participants build trust, reach mutual agreement, and reduce ethnocentrism and xenophobia. Therefore, the utilitarian, goal-oriented assumption prevails – that talk is privileged and a tool for fixing problems arising from intercultural differences. This assumption is consistent with the Western view of dialogue as talk, particularly that of the US dominant culture (e.g. see Carbaugh 1989). While talk as the standard way of communication in ICD further sanctions the Western way of doing things, two examples by Mutua and Gunn in Haydari and Holmes demonstrate why indigenous concepts of dialogue need to be explored further.

In *Community driven peacebuilding approaches: the case of postgenocide Rwanda*, Mutua challenges the traditional (i.e. Westernized) peacebuilding discourses and agendas, in which the *local* is reproduced through the lens of the *global* universal. Her case study of Rwandan folk dance as an indigenous self-expression shows how the incorporation of silence and critical reflection on the part of the audience while observing the dance can be essential to having a meaningful ICD. In other words, the conceptualization of *indigenous* was not done through Western incorporation of native researchers or merely utilizing the locals as participants. Mutua concluded that this nuanced, native way of communication, not the Western-style intervention adopted by local officials, was instrumental in building trust among the Rwandese people in the post-conflict era.

In the second example, *Storms, lies and silence: beyond dialogue-based models of intercultural contact*, Gunn narrated his experience participating in ICD, without translators, with native Khmer musicians who spoke very little English. Gunn is a practitioner who studies creative communication that is not focused solely on language. Gunn claimed that in the absence of talk (i.e. silence), creativity – another mode of communication rarely acknowledged in ICD scholarship – took over with tangible but surprising results. Although unable to reach understanding with each other through spoken language, the musicians nevertheless used extremely long silences and halting communication to forge ahead, providing a glimpse into the type of intercultural relations not frequently encountered by ICD scholars. Gunn's work examines how moments of language breakdown and silence can be viewed as a different type of intercultural experience. She criticizes the popular communication model that focuses exclusively on language.

Taken together, Mutua's and Gunn's examples show that non-traditional (by Western standards) modes of communication are valuable in facilitating meaningful ICD. Therefore, a more extensive exploration of other indigenous means of communication should be encouraged in ICD scholarship. Furthermore, a common assumption in Western concepts of dialogue is that communication between and among participants takes place directly without external interference. Therefore, the use of intermediaries is rarely explored, if at all, in most Western ICD scholarship. However, in *Dialogue across the divide: bridging the separation in Cyprus*, Broome (in Haydari and Holmes) suggested that in certain situations intermediaries could help maintain equality in the dialogue, giving participants a chance to work together meaningfully.

Broome facilitated small group dialogues to bring Greek and Turkish Cypriots together – the two communities that are separated by geography and history. The communities discussed their ethnocentric attitudes and stereotypes about each other. Through intermediary, Broome hoped the dialogues could be seen as a means for tackling differences and disputes. Broome's account suggests that while power relations might not necessarily foster equality between/among participants before or after an interaction, conditions of equality can be created momentarily to facilitate dialogue. However, Broome highlighted that such efforts to close the power imbalance between/among participants through ICD may not be sustainable and may require intermediaries to nurture respect and establish trust (also see Phipps in Holmes).

The utilitarian, goal-oriented approach when applied to ICD may also result in efforts to relate and to build relationships being overshadowed by the need to solve problems. In fact, building meaningful relationships through dialogue cannot be done in a truncated moment of communication, because that would require that participants bracket aside or suspend the continuity of history. Since ICD calls for a respectful exchange, consideration must be given to those who live or have lived through the traumas of history. In this view, ICD should be used first to heal the heart and build relationships before attempting to solve any problems. If trusting relationships are not built first, then ICD will not deepen understanding and any solutions envisaged will not be forthcoming. Consequently, time is a necessary investment in building the relationships needed to sustain engagement and dialogue.

ICD as elitist representation

Haydari and Holmes's collection of essays represent case studies submitted to the 2009 National Communication Association Summer Conference on Intercultural Dialogue at Maltepe University in Istanbul, Turkey. Introducing the book, Leeds-Hurwitz noted that the non-traditional conference format, in which participants worked in small groups and engaged directly in dialogue, unlike in monologic lecture-style formats, was designed to foster inclusivity and genuine intercultural exchange. Yet a deeper analysis of the claim and the resulting essays, as well as those in Holmes, reveals that some of the scholarship still veered toward elitism and Westernization, a fact not lost in Demenchonok.

First, the nature of the conference meant that space for ICD was reserved for highly educated Western and non-Western English-speaking elites (i.e. scholars, researchers, and practitioners). Education, indeed, exists where there is money, and it is a privilege. Subsequently, reports and data were filtered through the lenses of these elites and presented and shared, to a large extent, in non-indigenous ways.

Second, even though the data appear nuanced and were obtained from non-Western sources, the studies were conducted by and on participants who are privileged and non-typical. The participants are mostly educated, employed, and can conveniently be reached by researchers in predominantly elitist organizations and colleges where the scholars had exchange programs. Additionally, the studies conducted were often in the researchers' *languages* (i.e. codes of communication). Even when participants were native non-elites, the interpretation and articulation of their voices was done through the lens of educated international academics and practitioners, both Western and non-Western (e.g. see Phipps and Riitaoja & Dervin in Holmes).

Third, the studies share the common scholarly report and data collection techniques that are benchmarks of Western empiricism. Clearly, the Western way of conducting scholarship has been so deeply implanted. Thus, it can be said that Western power in recolonizing knowledge creation and interpretation is further perpetuated in ICD scholarship.

Dussel (in Demenchonok) questions this tendency for non-Western scholars to apply Western scholarship methods to ICD – a question quite similar to Miike's (2006) and Shi-xu's (2009) criticism of Eurocentric scholarship. The mere act of including non-Western scholars in a piece of work is not sufficient proof of genuine engagement in ICD (also see Lee 2014). Dussel argued further that even though an overwhelmingly number of non-Western scholars do not acknowledge the Westernization of their education, it is just as misleading to automatically treat their collaboration with Western researchers as genuine ICD, as it is to treat works by non-Western scholars as indigenous (see Demenchonok for an in-depth discussion about the Westernization in scholarship especially in South America).

In general, academics rarely have the time or resources to immerse themselves in and learn the communication codes of other cultures in order to engage effectively in ICD. However, expanding the scope of research to include poor and underprivileged people can give voice to communities that are *truly* muted, not on the so-called muted groups of non-Western elites on which current scholarship often focuses. Otherwise, the elites become a representation of the non-elites – a confusion that academics are yet to sort out.

Indeed, time and resource constraints should not serve to reinforce the power position of Western scholars. Such a power position affords these scholars the luxury of not having

to fully consider their own expectation of the other in the process of building genuine ICD. For example, the ability to communicate in English is often expected of non-English-speaking participants; but, the reverse expectation that English-speaking scholars learn other languages to foster and enrich genuine intercultural understanding is rarely expected, and certainly not exemplified in a majority of the works reviewed here. Consequently, having reputable interculturalists who view the world through one set of lenses lead the discussion about (world) cultural diversity may not do much to change the status quo or broaden the field. Rather, I proposed that research sites and types of participants be expanded beyond the current practice of choosing participants from universities and major employment organizations.

ICD scholarship as a place for Western domination

As explained above, ICD scholarship in and of itself can be viewed as a place for power struggle. The domination of Western ideologies and the preservation of Western scholarship practices is a reassertion of Western power in defining the human experience and generating new knowledge. Unfortunately, such recolonization can foster injustice and hide the true purpose of ICD – a means to meaningful understanding among and between humans. To allow such injustice is to allow the history of Western colonization to repeat itself. As evidenced by the history of Western power and domination, colonization triggered enormous human sacrifice and psychological trauma for generations. While ICD scholarship by itself may not endanger human lives, scholars should worry about the repercussions to society if and when, elitist, Westernized theoretical models are imposed on world communities that do not subscribe to Western ideologies.

So far much of the ICD scholarship that acknowledges other non-Western communities employ the anthropological *gaze* to understanding culture. The subject of study is often viewed through the lens and construction of Westernization as the *exotic* other. For the reasons alluded to earlier in this essay, non-Western scholars who follow the Western approach to scholarship may be partially responsible for perpetuating such a viewpoint.

Irrespective of countries of origin, most ICD scholars have learned and internalized Western approaches to scholarship. Dussel uses the example of Western colonization to explain how literature virtually everywhere in the world is tainted with Western philosophy. The Westernization is so embedded that even when non-Western scholars claim they were educated *locally*, they still are not free from Western ideology. Many may be oblivious of this fact because their literature, even when accessible in their native languages, have been authored or translated by those with Western education, so that non-Western researchers' contribution or participation is not necessarily a sign that the scholarship is diverse or inclusive.

Of course non-Western scholars may view their adoption of the Western conventions of scholarship the same way racial minorities view cultural assimilation into the dominant society – as a survival tactic. In US academic circles, for example, minority scholars often have to prove that their scholarship is equally relevant and valuable. However, this sort of injustice in scholarship is rarely discussed, let alone addressed, and deserves a separate discussion.

As crucial as it is for non-Western scholars to view their culture and literature through their indigenous rather than Western lenses, it is equally important for ICD scholarship to

deconstruct its core assumptions. Thus far such a deconstruction of the Eurocentric, Western academic nature of ICD scholarship has not captured much attention of scholars who perform the scholarship. This says very much about the core tenets and norms of ICD scholarship that are invisible but prevalent, unstated but dictating much of what scholars do. This concern is not trivial, because such a deconstruction will have a ripple effect not only on the continued development of ICD scholarship, but also on its teaching pedagogy and education curricula worldwide. In fact the process of globalization has enabled the wide circulation and adoption of Western curricula, which function to perpetuate Western superiority.

While promoting equality and combating injustice in the global community are ideal goals for ICD, these ideals are highly challenging and, frankly, beyond the scope of current ICD scholarship. Nevertheless, a few authors in *Demenchonok* took the bold step of proposing solutions to ending injustices in the world (see McBride; Dussel; *Demenchonok*; Satyanarayana; and Dallmary). Their essays tackle issues such as the need for the dominant groups to share power – a very challenging thing to explain to those in power and hence one limitation of the so-called *middle-range theories* in ICD. The calls to use ICD to curtail world political and ideological turmoil may be the result of a late realization that the dominant Western cultures have failed to coexist peacefully with other cultures. Indeed, when non-dominant cultures resisted colonization in the past, their attempts at dialogue were often vilified. However, the current struggles of the non-dominant groups may be affecting the dominant groups, making them receptive to suggestions to work toward the greater good.

Conclusion

In a world where the non-dominant perspectives are colliding with the dominant perspectives at every turn and the non-dominant outnumber the dominant, the dominant cultures must carefully rethink the distribution of power control. ICD scholarship may serve as the platform for justice, and interculturalists should practice what they preach. Instead of merely writing about and teaching others how to practice ICD, interculturalists' gaze should turn inwards, to educate themselves on what ICD truly means (cf. Crosbie in Holmes). Some scholars have proposed that issues of injustice be bracketed aside when performing ICD, but real-life participants have identities that cannot be discarded and as Dussel illustrated, understanding history of Western colonization may hold the key to true understanding of ICD scholarship. That means that any solutions that employ ICD must simultaneously address both the origin and the injustices that led to the problem.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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