A Contextual Model for Understanding Intercultural Communication

Anteneh Tsegaye

Abstract:

Neuliep's Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach is designed for teachers and students who are dealing with intercultural communication (ICC). In addition to providing comprehensive conceptual issues, the work pioneers a contextual model for the study of intercultural communication. It aims at introducing fundamental topics, theories, concepts, and themes that are at the center of ICC. The model is based on the fact that when people from different cultures/co-cultures encounter and exchange verbal and/or non-verbal messages, they do so within a variety of contexts. These include cultural, microcultural, environmental, socio-relational, and perceptual contexts. This edition is unique from its earlier editions for its inclusion of a new chapter on intercultural conflicts and the addition of discussion questions in every chapter.

A Contextual Model for Understanding Intercultural Communication

Anteneh Tsegaye

Since just recently, intercultural communication is no longer a privileged professional exercise but part of day-to-day routine that impacts everyone's success in business or personal growth. The development of communication and transportation technologies, drastic demographic change within certain regions, globalisation of economy, and other personal and political imperatives have fueled the proliferation of interactions between people from different regions around the world. In response, study of intercultural communication from various perspectives has blossomed.

Functional, Interpretive, Critical – and Contextual Approaches
Despite philosophical and methodological divergence, three perspectives dominate the field. These are the functional, the interpretive, and the critical approaches. Researchers from the functional perspective employ interpersonal communication theories and constructs in their examination of communication within intercultural contexts. The interpretive approach, founded by ethnographers of communication and sociolinguists, analyses speech within situational contexts that reflect cultural norms in talks and acts. The critical approach is meta-theoretical and includes many assumptions of the interpretive approach, but focuses more on macro-contexts, such as the social and political, that influence communication. Despite growing interest in intercultural dialogue research, there is seldom agreement among scholars in conceptualising and researching it.
In this continually growing and changing field, James Neuliep presents a contextual approach to intercultural communication. However, the text neither clearly aligns itself with any of these philosophical positions (even though the book takes context at the centre of ICC), nor does it discuss them. This omission can lead to a skewed view of the field. The greatest asset of this text is probably the authors' assertion that understandings of communication and culture must be situated in context – an approach generally ignored by the traditional ICC scholars. Specifically, this book seeks to build on the fascination that intercultural communication naturally holds, to raise consciousness about cultural differences, and to help students become more competent in ICC.

A Model of Interrelated Contexts

KULT_online. Review Journal for the Study of Culture
24 / 2010
journals.ub.uni-giessen.de/kult-online

Neuliep proposes a new line of argument with respect to contextualising intercultural communication but no new conceptualisation of basic concepts. His model presents a series of mutually dependent contexts, graphically represented by a series of concentric circles. Neuliep commences his presentation with the outermost circle of the model – the cultural context – and moves inward, chapter by chapter, towards more specific contexts of communication: microcultural, environmental, and then, within this last, two perceptual contexts. These refer to the individual characters of communicators from different cultures. The shared area between the two represents sociorelational context, the relationship between the communicators. The model argues that intercultural communication is defined by the interdependence of these various contexts.

Definitions of Context, Culture, and Communication

In the book, context refers to setting, situation, circumstances, background, and overall framework within which communication occurs. However, there is no clear argument or set of criteria for classifying contexts. Therefore, it is sometimes confusing to distinguish contexts, such as perceptual from cultural, for the fact that they seem to overlap. The text contextualises itself in US culture and examples provided address the same.

Like most other books in the discipline, the text takes culture and communication to be at the heart of ICC. However, it does not introduce a new line of conceptualising them, but rather repeats the most common, deterministic views. In agreement with most of the literature, communication is characterised as processual, dynamic, symbolic, intentional, contextual, and cultural. The author also defines culture as an accumulated pattern of values and beliefs shared by an identifiable group of people with a common history and symbol system (cf. p. 17). These definitions are well-discussed and are in agreement with most cited descriptions of the concepts; comparison of various definitions of the terms was not the purpose of the text.

Microcultural Context vs. 'National Culture'

Each chapter focuses on one context and combination of factors. Naturalistic, cross-cultural dialogues throughout the book demonstrate how key theoretical concepts manifest themselves in human interaction. Furthermore, valid and reliable self-assessment instruments that measure concepts such as ICC apprehension, ethnocentrism, individualism, and collectivism are included in every chapter. These instruments help students know themselves and assess their performance and skill-development as they learn the important concepts of ICC.

The first chapter starts by discussing benefits of ICC in the 21st century. The second chapter goes on to quote Edward Hall's famous statement, "culture hides more than it reveals." The author agrees with Roger Keesing's assertion that culture provides people with an implicit theory about how to behave and interpret the behaviour of others.

The third chapter describes what the author calls "microcultural context", meaning cultures often referred to as minority or subcultures, here associated with race and ethnicity. One specific area for contention concerns the notion of microculture. Although Neuliep recognises the existence of cultural variance and discusses the concept of microculture, much of the text is

still built on generalised and unquestioned 'national culture'. Such a treatment has been criticised in numerous scholarly works for normalising and perpetuating privileged cultural perspectives as well as for homogenising the diverse views of cultural groups within a nation.

Environmental, Perceptual, and Sociorelational Context

The fourth chapter addresses what the author calls "environmental context", representing the complex relation between humans and their environment and variations in this across cultures.

Then, the fifth chapter presents the perceptual context. The author agrees with Michael Polyani's notion that humans are not objective and impartial observers of the world around them. The text assumes an information-processing approach to describing the process of human communication and the nature of communicators for all humans take, store and recall information in much the same way (cf. p. 179).

The next chapter discusses sociorelational context: Neuliep argues that intercultural communication is a group phenomenon expressed by individuals; intercultural communicators view each other not as unique individuals but as members of a different culture.

Finally, the last six chapters focus on basic concepts: language, intercultural relationships, conflicts, and other intercultural issues. As can be seen from the chapter contents, the text presents various issues and concepts which are vital for understanding the fundamentals of intercultural communication.

Informative Insights, Practical Tools

In sum, apart from the limitations discussed so far, Neuliep offers a very useful model of ICC in that it pictures communication as occurring within a series of concentric contexts. (Some writers, like Gudykunst and Kim, use dotted lines to show the overlap or interrelationship between contexts or influences on communication.) Neuliep indeed intends to consider the contexts as interrelated. On top of this, his attempt to integrate concepts and theories from competence research makes the book a unique contribution, since most communication scientists fail to incorporate such variables in descriptions of ICC. The book provides a range of examples to explain concepts and constructs common in the literature. Since the text provides rich conceptual reviews and practical pedagogical tools and self-assessment instruments, it is highly recommended for students of ICC. It is also a very informative and introductory book for people interested in understanding their practice of intercultural communication at interpersonal or organisational level.