

EDO POGLIA*

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY MODEL FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural Communication, under the pressure of an ever-increasing community of researchers, has grown into a very broad and dynamic field of study, yet a comprehensive theory and methods designed precisely for IC are still to be defined, while epistemological ambiguity still tends to prevail. The attempt brought forward at the University of Lugano is to suggest a careful reflection that could foster the definition of a paradigm of IC. The model proposed in this article has the ambition to develop through an interdisciplinary approach a set of comprehensive analytical tools and concrete communicative competencies and operative instruments to tackle multicultural situations. Intercultural communication competencies, which have been the focus of numerous researches, are often confined to interpersonal communication. The approach presented in this paper aims at extending the field to public, educational and media communication.

Keywords: multicultural, intercultural communication, epistemology, competencies, interdisciplinary, didactic, I2C.

* University of Lugano, pogliae@lu.unisi.ch

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, to briefly and schematically outline the current scientific debate concerning the epistemological foundations of intercultural communication (IC), here understood as a form of communication in which participants, individual or collective, refer to different cultural configurations; and on the other, to present the general lines of an IC model developed at the University of Lugano, capable of proposing and systemizing concepts, instruments and methods required for a truly interdisciplinary approach to IC. This model, called I2C: *Improving Intercultural Communication*, has two aims: to facilitate an analytical approach to IC while at the same time providing concrete communicative competencies and operative instruments. The model is specially devised in order to be applicable in specific contexts and areas in which ICIEF - *Institute for Public and Educational Communication* of the University of Lugano - operates.

1.1. Multicultural situations

During the past decades the use of the terms multicultural and multiculturalism has experienced an explosive growth, accompanied however by a steadily increasing variety of meanings. Considering, for example, the term multiculturalism, we are forced to notice that not only it is used in everyday speech with different connotations sharing a unique semantic core, that of “plurality of cultures”, but that polysemy exists also in academic usage: there it is used particularly in a normative key, linked to political philosophy (Semprini 1997; Rigotti 2006) or as a synthesis of a political proposal (see, for example, Kymlica 1995), tending to regulate relations between cultural majorities and minorities (the example of Canada is emblematic). But the term is often also used in a descriptive connotation. That the term multiculturalism is polysemic is hardly surprising, given that it covers myriad situations in which the concept of difference is applied, as for example nationality, language, religion, socio-economic level, gender and education. In its descriptive connotation it refers to the socio-cultural context, today prevailing for a large part of the world population, in which people and groups referring to different cultural configurations happen to coexist in the same geographical space.

The causes that determined the development of such a context are multiple: some are linked to the traditional forms of spatial mobility

(economic or political migrations, mass displacement of populations due to war or geopolitical reasons, etc.); others instead are the consequence of more recent economic developments. Multicultural situations have increased also due to expanded mobility, linked to short term tourism (holidays) and long term tourism (for example retired people in search of a better climate). This aspect is strictly linked to another factor relevant for the expansion of multiculturalism, i.e. the development of means of transport.

Moreover the extremely rapid pace of innovation in telecommunication technology allows anybody who has access to the “web”, to be connected wherever he finds himself. The obvious consequence of this phenomenon is a further deterritorialization¹ of social relations and networks².

On the whole, these evolutions disrupt the moderately stable relation between social structure, cultural configuration and geographical location that distinguishes traditional societies.

We are thus confronted, in particular in Western societies, with changes in our ways of life under the influence of transformations that, according to Anthony Giddens, by increasing their frequency and intensity are creating a global cosmopolitan society, which we are the first ones to experience and which unsettles our usual way of life, wherever we may be (Giddens 2000). At the individual and collective level, this means experiencing new cultural differences (linguistic, religious, of values and behaviour, etc.), which will add themselves to those normally existing within every society (linked, for example, to the social and educational stratification) and that offer the potential for personal growth but also uncertainty and doubt, and therefore generate requests of return, either real or symbolic, back to secure and known contexts and values.

The occasions for encounter inherent in multicultural situations are in fact often characterized by misunderstanding, incomprehension and diffidence and not infrequently give way to hostile attitudes and behaviours. These realities weight on our daily lives also because they are heavily underlined and structured in the context of political, ideological and religious conflicts of interest that distinguish our time. For those who

¹ In this article, deterritorialization is used in its anthropological meaning, i. e. as a weakening of ties between culture and place.

² The deterritorialization of social networks in no way implies their weakening, but on the contrary may in fact sometimes lead to their establishment (as, for example, in the case of environmentalists, non global groups, etc.). To this effect see Castells (1997).

adopt not only an analytical but also an operative approach, there is an evident need to redefine the interpretive categories of multiculturalism, in such a way that the encounter with the “other” does not degenerate into conflict, but represents an occasion for reciprocal enrichment. This is valid, for example, in the field of education (pedagogy and didactics) (Poglia 1995) or of psychiatry (an interesting example is represented by the *Centre Deveraux* in Paris, which has a multicultural working team for the psychiatric treatment of immigrant patients³). This process must naturally take place at the individual level, but also at the level of collective actors and in particular of organizations, be they enterprises, public, or private non-profit institutions: particularly public services (health, social, educational, etc.) and international national and non governmental organisations. It is precisely among several of these actors that, starting decades ago, numerous operative and partly scientific proposals developed, based on the recognition of the centrality of their internal multicultural realities. This is valid, for example, in the field of education (pedagogy and didactics) (Poglia 1995) or of psychiatry (an interesting example is represented by the *Centre Deveraux* in Paris, which has a multicultural working team for the psychiatric treatment of immigrant patients⁴).

In the field of political sciences, some multicultural contexts characterised by the coexistence of cultural “majorities” and “minorities” within the same national boundaries have polarized political attention in some countries and conferred on the term multiculturalism a colouring profoundly influenced by political philosophy as well as by ideological choices. This gave birth to a vision of society in which, contrary to the classical liberal principle according to which all citizens are equal in front of the law and the individual is the only bearer of rights and obligations, some cultural or ethnic “communities” (based on a particular language or religion), see themselves conferred with rights or assigned responsibilities, such as the regulation of the use of languages, as for example in the case of Quebec (for example Taylor 1992) - or religious practices.

1.2. Intercultural communication

The term “intercultural” is also eminently polysemic, sometimes simply overlapping with “multicultural”, other times emphasising situations in

³ To this respect see Coppo 2003.

⁴ To this respect see Coppo 2003.

which beside the mere “juxtaposition” of “cultures” and of individuals and social groups “belonging” to them, intense interactions can be witnessed. In other instances “intercultural” does indeed apply to these interactions, but only when they are synergetic and enriching for all parties involved, be they individual or collective actors.

In some areas the term “intercultural” thus defined has come to occupy a large part of the semantic space, which elsewhere instead is shared with the concepts of multicultural, pluricultural, etc., as is the case in the field of education in many European countries, strongly influenced since the eighties by the analysis and proposals brought forward by researchers and international organizations such as the Council of Europe under the label of “intercultural pedagogy” and other times under the more ideological one of “interculturalism” (Poglia 1995; Allemann 1997).

As far as our study is concerned, the term intercultural will be used to indicate situations in which individuals and collective actors referring themselves to different cultural configurations come into touch with each other and interact (positively or not): interaction that of course is often of a communicative nature, at the interpersonal as well as at the media and institutional level. In fact, sometimes it is precisely the peculiar mechanisms of communication that constitute one of the major causes of the problems to which we referred above: from simple comprehension difficulties linked to incomplete linguistic competence to misunderstandings caused by different non verbal codes; from false interpretations of messages and behaviours due to the ignorance of the other’s cultural background, to the difficulty of appropriately managing people and activities due to communicational deficiencies and incompetence; not to mention the inability, not always innocent, to correctly present and interpret situations and problems involving cultural differences, particularly in the media.

On the other hand, good intercultural communication and the competencies that go with it are one of the essential keys for unblocking some of the problematic situations mentioned earlier, sometimes even where the causes are of a completely different nature: economical, political, social, etc.

This is true for interpersonal communication, but also in the context of the activities of public and private institutions (international organisations, public administrations, health, social and ecclesiastical institutions, etc.), inside the educational system (basic, higher and continuing education), as well as in the context of many commercial activities linked to tourism, management and, of course, the media.

Therefore it is no surprise that, in this and other fields, IC competencies have become more and more part of many professionals' standard background, at least of those at the middle and senior levels. IC competencies must thus be learned and "formed". For educators and trainers, this implies the mastery of specific communicative instruments and, as a prerequisite, of analytical and interpretive tools related to the situations and problems linked to IC. These tools must be sufficiently efficient, transparent, coherent and comprehensive in order to cover all the communicative realities implied in IC situations (for example in interpersonal communication, communication between collective actors, media communication, etc.).

We have pointed out the ever-growing use but also the polysemy of the terms "multiculturalism" and "intercultural communication". This remark can of course be broadened to a number of other concepts of the same "family", as it has for example recently been done by Isar, in particular referring to the concepts of intercultural management, intercultural dialogue, interculturalism, intercultural deontology, etc. (Isar 2006).

2. Epistemological positioning of intercultural communication

2.1. *IC at its dawn*

The term IC is of recent scientific use and is generally traced back to the fifties and to the work developed by the Edward T. Hall. In formulating his original paradigm on IC, he had been influenced by anthropology (his own field of learning), but also, ethology and by psychoanalytic theory. It should be pointed out that already in Hall's contribution we find a characteristic that colours many of the developments of IC until our days: the wish not to separate the analytical from the operative approach to IC, but rather to focus on the concept of "IC competencies" which indeed represents the meeting ground between analysis, comprehension and action.

In fact Hall, who during the fifties was responsible for the formation of American diplomats (in the Foreign Service Institute / FSI: part of the US State Department), and had a work experience as an anthropologist with the Hopi and Navajo Indians, lamented in the teaching of anthropology the low translatability of theoretic concepts into competencies concretely applicable at the professional level. He propose to integrate the perspectives of different disciplines, in particular of communication,

anthropology and linguistics, in what would become known as intercultural communication, with the aim of developing communication *between* cultures. To emphasize the role of communication, Hall uses the expression *communication is culture and culture is communication* (Hall 1959: 186).

2.2. IC today: discipline or interdisciplinary approach?

Like other fields of scientific research that benefit from a strong social and economic demand (such as for example environmental and educational sciences, etc.) and that thus see the flourishing of numerous research and teaching activities, IC is confronted today with a situation not of lack but on the contrary of an abundance of studies, applications and educational programs. Therefore it is not surprising to see that, in spite of some really promising scientific perspectives, the judgement on the current situation is extremely diversified: for Jan Blommaert, “few fields are as fuzzy as that of the study of intercultural communication” (Blommaert 1998), whereas Liisa Salo-Lee notes with prudence that “Intercultural Communication as an academic discipline is however relatively new” (Salo-Lee 2006a), while Young Yun Kim asserts firmly that “Intercultural Communication has since matured into a vibrant area of study within the field of Communication” (Kim 2005).

In the IC field, a basic ambivalence that reflects two conflicting visions can be observed (in our opinion the two views can be integrated, even though currently they are far from being so). On the one hand, IC is conceived as an academic discipline in itself, or at least developing as such, having as its object a specific sector of communication; and on the other hand IC itself is considered as an object or field of study on which there is a converging interest by diverse disciplines and in particular of anthropology, sociology, linguistics and psychology, operating with their own paradigms and methods.

2.3. IC as a discipline

Due to the relative novelty of this position, it is not simple to define precisely either the borders of the problems it studies, or those of the methods and approaches it uses. Recently Kim (2005) tried to propose a synthesis of the areas of activity of this discipline, highlighting seven major issues and kinds of approach.

2.3.1. Cultural communication

The studies linked to *cultural communication* centre on an emic perspective, i.e. they try to explain the salient aspects of a cultural group's specific communication starting from an internal perspective. Culture is conceived as a system of relatively stable inter-subjective meanings and the studies in this field are essentially descriptive. The aim is to outline the essential characteristics of the communication practices specific to the cultural communities subject to analysis. The methodology commonly used in this context is of a descriptive-interpretative kind, as for example ethnographic field research, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and rhetorical analysis. Reference authors in this area are, among others, Broome (1990), Carbaugh (1993), Chang (1998) and Fitch (1998).

2.3.2. Cross-cultural communication

In contrast to the internal perspective adopted by the emic approach seen above, etic studies in IC adopt an "external" perspective, aiming to compare two or more cultural groups. Unlike the studies on cultural communication, which mostly refer to a philosophical position of cultural relativism, cross cultural communication studies adopt a vision more strongly linked to cultural universalism and their objective is to identify the cross cultural variations of communication phenomena on the basis of some "universal" dimensions, as for example that of individualism vs. collectivism or of low context vs. high context cultures (Hall, 1976). Reference authors in this field are for example Hofstede (1980), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Triandis (1995).

2.3.4. Intrapersonal and behavioural factors in IC

Several studies have focused on intrapersonal aspects to describe and explain the problems inherent to IC by analysing psychological factors such as stereotypes, prejudices, racism and intolerance. Some important authors in this field are Hecht (1998) and van Dijk (1989).

2.3.5. Intercultural communication competence (ICC)

In this context IC competencies are considered as a non culturally specific phenomenon, that allows positive outcomes in IC to be reached.

Relevant authors in this field are for example Gudykunst, who explains ICC on the basis of three psychological factors: uncertainty, anxiety and consciousness, in the light of his AUM theory (Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory) (Gudykunst 1995); Collier and Thomas (1988) propose an ICC model based on the capacity to negotiate one's own cultural identity, while other authors such as Byram et al. (2001) define ICC as the union of three different kinds of components: cognitive (knowledge), affective (attitudes) and behavioural (capacities). Integrating these two positions, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) propose a model according to which identity can be negotiated on the basis of the cognitive, affective and behavioural resources of interlocutors.

2.3.6. Adaptation to an unfamiliar culture

Studies on adjustment, acculturation, integration and assimilation and on the modes by which individuals improve their functional and psychological fitness with particular attention to the necessary competencies for the individual.

Particularly relevant in this field are Kim's studies (1977) on the "path model of acculturation", Gudykunst's "AUM theory" seen above as well as the theoretic models developed in cross cultural psychology, for example by Berry (1990).

2.3.7. Cultural identity in intercultural contexts

Studies on cultural identity and on concepts linked to it, such as for example those of ethnic identity, ethnolinguistic identity, "racial" identity, group identity, etc., seen as predominantly uniform and dominating over individual identity. Some relevant studies are those on identity negotiation by Collier and Thomas (1988).

2.3.8. Power inequality and intercultural relationship

Critical analysis of the previous studies, accused of minimizing power relations in IC and of serving the status quo cause by reproducing the dominant ideology. Traces of these studies can be found in the collection of essays by Gonzalez, Houston & Chen (Gonzalez, Houston & Chen 1994).

Another classification, only partially coherent with that proposed by Kim, was elaborated by Ogay (2000), who adopted the definition of IC

of Dasen and Retschitzki (1989) according to which IC is considered as the study of the contacts between cultural groups. According to Ogay (2000) it is possible to identify four main currents in IC, relating to the study of:

- cultural diversity (with or without comparison between cultural groups)
- contacts between people of different cultural origin
- intercultural competence
- models who aim at describing IC in its complexity.

It should be noted here that, if these taxonomies are accepted as valid, three issues remain largely absent in spite of their centrality for the practice of IC, i.e. those linked to the media, to organizations and to problems between IC and other disciplines and approaches, like for example intercultural pedagogy.

2.4. IC as an “object” of study: interdisciplinary approach vs. the burden of “disciplinary traditions”

On the other hand, IC is defined not as a discipline, but as an object or field of study that requires different disciplinary approaches, for example from anthropology, sociology, linguistics and semiotics, psychology and other disciplines. According to our point of view only a truly interdisciplinary approach, able to fully value the contributions of the different disciplines, would allow real situations to be analysed completely: IC becomes, from this perspective, not so much a discipline but rather an interdisciplinary field of study (a model of which will be presented in the third part of the article).

The development of the “IC discipline” is facing all the normal difficulties that nascent disciplines have to face (epistemological and methodological difficulties, but also – in particular in the European reality – organizational ones and those relating to institutional recognition), as well as the more imposing one of a reality that appears to be vaster than the scientific instruments allowing it to be described and analysed; on the other hand, the interdisciplinary approach appears to face even greater difficulties, handicapped as it is by the (current) incompatibility of the paradigms underpinning the various disciplines invoked to study IC (to this respect, see Pogia 2005). By observing the flow of scientific production, a third position can be identified which occupies a substantial part

of the field, without however being openly asserted: it's the position of numerous linguists, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists and others that consider IC through the paradigms and methodologies of their own discipline and that implicitly define it simply as that which these paradigms and methodologies allow them to observe, often reducing it to one of the specific concepts outlined by their discipline. The interpersonal emphasis given to IC by many psychologists and linguists probably follows this logic, due to the distance of most of their epistemological and methodological horizons from the structural and institutional aspects implied by IC.

If instead we consider the multitude of studies, much appreciated in the management context, which elaborate the concept of "cultural dimensions", built with quantitative methods bearing a sociological stamp, such as those by Triandis (1995) and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993), conducted in the wake of the famous field studies of large multinationals by Hofstede (1980 and 1991), we can only be perplexed by the lack of links with the "cultural standards" approach, developed in the context of psychology by Thomas (2003) and his school, with an approach very close to the first both at the conceptual level and for its practical use, for example in the corporate world. It should further be noticed that neither approach gives much consideration to the contributions of anthropology, traditional or more recent and critical, like for example that of Geertz (1987) or Kuper (1999), nor to those of a psychosocial inspiration and linked to identity related issues (for example Martinot 1995 or Vinsonneau 2002).

The same can be said, at least in part, concerning the weak synergies that seem to be developing between communication studies which try, as for example in Lull (2002) to analyse the impact of media on culture(s) and thus on the multicultural framework of societies, and studies of linguistic-semiotic inspiration, such as for example those by Danesi & Perron (1999) centred on IC micro-processes, that therefore appear extremely useful to the understanding of communicative processes at the macro-social level.

Yet it is in no way self-evident that the causes of this situation are to be ascribed uniquely to the distance between the paradigms at the base of each discipline. Hence we can observe that the necessary synergy between cross cultural language studies (Wierzbicka 2003, Clyne 1994), and those inspired by cross cultural psychology (for example Berry 1992), which due to their nature would seem destined to meet and interweave, does not

seem to be a major concern for researchers. Actually in some cases there is real animosity between different schools, even, or maybe especially, between those coming from the same disciplinary context, as for example happens with the studies of cross cultural psychology and those of intercultural psychology (for example Mantovani 2004 or Coppo 2003).

Other difficulties can be encountered when choices of an ethical or ideological kind come to overlap scientific analysis (see for example, Habermas & Taylor 1994; Taguieff 1997; Wieviorka 1998; Fabris 2004), which is often the case when IC is considered against the background of choices such as “political multiculturalism” or “intercultural education”, even though precisely this interdisciplinary perspective may contribute to the definition of a more explicit border between strictly analytical and more normative aspects, which would certainly be welcome.

The different epistemological perspectives and analytical definitions of different researchers represent a further obstacle to the development of an IC interdisciplinary field as well as of an “IC discipline”. The chaotic use of concepts in this area, even of the most central ones like for example those of culture and communication, is a problem that finds its origins in causes of a double nature: on the one hand the richness of a research field still insufficiently structured (particularly in Europe) both from the point of view of academic institutionalisation and from that of the spread of results, which leads to proposals ever more anxious to contrast and mark themselves off from existing ones, juxtaposing concepts without truly clarifying contrasts and establishing the necessary epistemological links; on the other hand, the tendency to use extremely vague and not sufficiently analytical definitions, which therefore cannot adequately define the true elements that constitute the object they claim to be applied to. Limiting ourselves to the concept of culture, it is always tempting to define it as “all that gives meaning to the world” or even, following the proposals of the Tartu school of cultural semiotics, as a “set of texts⁵ and a non-hereditary collective memory” (Eco 2000; Lotman 2000), rather than making the effort of defining precisely (maybe too slavishly?) its constitutive elements and the relations that exist between them. The fact remains that only a definition of this kind really allows the use of the concept in an interdisciplinary perspective, in addition to offering evident advantages from the methodological point of view for empirical research.

⁵ It must be noted however that the notion of text plays a role in the Tartu school in a quite structured hypothesis about the semiotic functioning of culture in a tension with “code”.

A further problem that weighs on the interdisciplinary study of IC, but which is obviously not limited to this field, relates to the difficulty of finding effective points of convergence between the methods used by different disciplines, allowing synergies actually to develop from the results obtained empirically (the difficulties of connection between the studies concerning individual and collective identities are exemplary).

Finally let's not forget that, in the problems surrounding IC, the great epistemological and ideological controversies that continue to rend the social sciences (for example: structuralism, functionalism, individualism or constructivism) find new and better fuel to ignite, not least because of their own ideological potency.

The aforementioned problems, which are manifest many researchers and especially to those who follow and interdisciplinary approach, have a strong influence on the coherence and thus on the efficiency of the study of IC. This is the case of Christopher Hall, who identifies the main obstacles to the development of an IC interdisciplinary field in the use of old or falsified theories (as for example the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), the dogmatic repetition of unverified hypothesis, or the inadequate knowledge of the scientific production in other languages. (Hall 2006).

3. The I2C model: Improving Intercultural Communication

To avoid the aforementioned difficulties, a model for the study of IC and the implementation of IC competencies is being developed at the University of Lugano in order to offer an effective training from the point of view of the analysis and the management of IC for young high level professionals in the framework of an Executive Master in IC (MIC). This model, which was at first conceived with motivations and needs of a didactic nature (Poglia, 2005), is thought to be used effectively not only in the context of interpersonal face-to-face communication, but also in media communication and especially in communication involving the participation of public and private institutional actors. This model recognises the need to take into account and integrate, in the most interdisciplinary perspective possible, at least the principal ones among the countless contributions developed by the different disciplines belonging to the humanistic and social sciences, but without excluding the possibility that in the medium term the results could usefully be incorporated in an IC disciplinary perspective.

Concretely, the model intends to “revisit” the analytical instruments required for a systematic approach to IC and thereby offer the epistemological foundations needed for an inter-disciplinary synthesis. It should also, as a “secondary product”, allow a better relationship between scientific knowledge about IC and the operational competencies necessary for the practice of the various fields in which the communication dimension plays an important role in its three cardinal forms: interpersonal, through the media and institutional, keeping in mind ethical problems (individual and collective, among which those linked to aspects of political philosophy) that are common to most IC situations.

The specific perspectives from which we propose to analyse IC are the following:

- communication processes as such, from the elementary ones (the “atoms” of communication) to the complex processes where a multitude of elementary processes come into play, linked by relations of consequentiality, feedback, determinism, etc., and not infrequently rooted within communication “systems”.
- cultural configurations (the “cultures of...”), that is to say the specific sets of cultural elements to which interlocutors refer, be they individual or collective actors; cultural elements such as forms of knowledge, codes, representations of self and of the world, values, etc., often coagulated in cultural dimensions and strictly linked to identitarian realities.
- individual realities and psychological mechanisms, be they cognitive, affective or behavioural, that distinguish interlocutors.
- social actors and frameworks (social groups, local or regional societies, companies, institutions, etc.): the “social space” where communication takes place, but also where cultural configurations emerge and where individuals develop and evolve as such.

Across these four fundamental elements there is also to be considered (as an essential component of their makeup, even though often undervalued in IC studies) the time and historical dimension, indispensable both analytically and operationally in order to be able to set IC in its real context and thus allow adequate understanding and application.

The I2C model

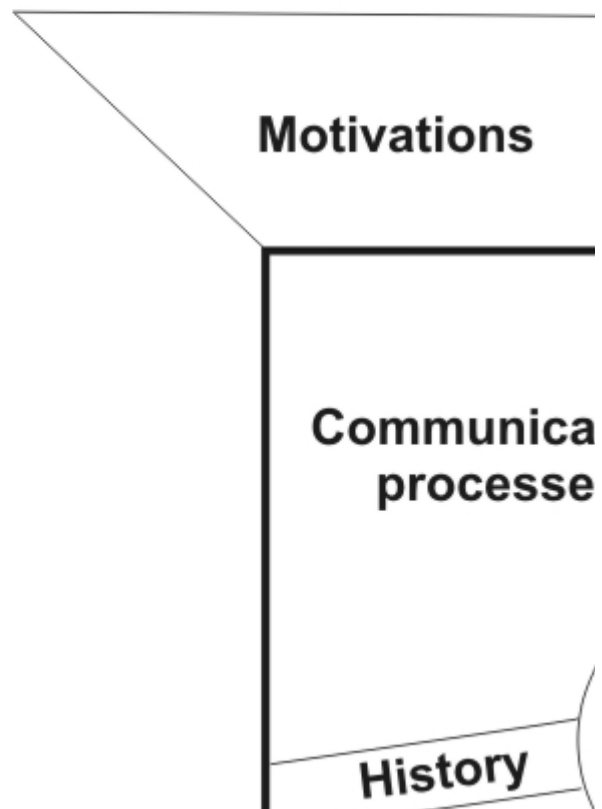


Figure 1: The I2C Model

Having identified the perspectives, which collectively may permit the reconstruction of the complexity of a real IC situation, it is naturally necessary to redefine them in a systematic way, paying particular attention to the definition of their constituent elements and of the relationship

between them, particularly when these concepts and approaches, originating as mentioned above from different disciplines and schools, are at best tangential to each other. Accumulated teaching experience shows that it is not at all self-evident how to manage this operation with key IC concepts such as those of communication or culture.

The definition of such elements must of course be done by comparing and integrating the contributions of different disciplines and scientific approaches. In the definition of “communication”, for example, there is a need to take into account different communication models, integrating contributions from linguistics, semiotics and several information theories.

In the same way, the concept of cultural configuration will be defined by keeping in mind and trying to take a position on the multitude of visions and definitions of culture born of the different major anthropological and sociological tendencies: functionalist approaches in the wake of Durkheim, Malinowski and Parsons, structuralist and some systemic approaches, that consider culture almost exclusively as a global social fact prevailing over individual realities and existing because it is functional to society, allowing primary needs to be satisfied and society to be reproduced, by delivering instruments essential for integration; individualist and interactionist approaches, that instead consider culture as something that “distinguishes” individuals although being the product of interaction; constructivist approaches, that follow the path traced by Berger and Luckman (1966), who consider the individual at the same time as product and producer of culture, and that evolve in a galaxy of related but distinct positions, such as those of Garfinkel, Cicourel, Goffman and others. The contributions of sociological schools intertwine closely with the (central) ones of English social anthropology, of American imprint cultural anthropology and of French ethnology, from Malinowski’s and Radcliffe-Brown’s functionalism to Benedict’s, Mead’s and Linton’s culturalism, including the more critical approaches such as Geertz’s, not to mention the contributions originating from cross cultural analysis (for example those already mentioned centred on the “national dimensions” in the wake of the studies by Hofstede or studies on values that distinguish national societies or cultural areas, for example read through the World Values Surveys – WVS - promoted by Inglehart) and from the sector of cultural studies. A similar definitional procedure is obviously applied to the model’s other selected perspectives: individual realities, social actors and frameworks and historical time and historical dimensions.

Following this first step aimed at reaching terminological clarity, defining concepts not only in a global but in an analytical way, a radical methodological reflection will then be necessary to allow the shift from the descriptive to the interpretative and explanatory approach, starting from the fundamental question of the potency of determinism (in terms of causality, co-evolution, etc.) in the face of individual and collective freedoms (freedom as “inclination”, “adaptation”, etc.) with particular focus on historical aspects and time (“sociological times” lived in tune with social and cultural contexts and not necessarily linked to the physical flow of time)⁶.

To these aspects, with evident methodological consequences, needs to be added an ethical and philosophical reflection (relating in particular to political philosophy), because IC issues profoundly affect today’s entire ethical-political debate while many problems involving IC find their origin and their determinants precisely in the ethical-political controversies that traverse the world today (from inter- and intra-religious conflicts linked to more or less “fundamentalist” or liberal interpretations of principles and dogmas, to those involving ethnic causes or pretexts).

The present interdisciplinary approach does not have the pretension to be a pioneer. For example, Marita Svane, starting from a philosophical perspective (and in particular a phenomenological one, in the wake of Gadamer, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty) proposed a model of “cultural dynamics” that, just as the model I2C does, aims at integrating the individual aspects, the social structures and the “cultural lifeworlds” (Svane 2006).

In addition, the I2C model (which, we recall, has an essential didactic mission) aims not only to supply some solid epistemological and methodological foundations for an inter-disciplinary analysis of IC, but also to supply some operational instruments capable of translating into operative practice the results of IC analytical studies. Its objective is therefore also to develop concrete procedures and instruments able to improve IC competencies, not only at the level of knowledge, but also of attitudes and abilities. Salo-Lee reminds that, in intercultural studies, the term of intercultural competencies is tied to different other concepts, as for example to those of intercultural awareness, intercultural adaptation, intercultural effectiveness, cross-cultural proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, etc. (Salo-Lee 2006b).

⁶ Compare to this regard, for example, George Gurvitch (1963) and Maurice Erard (1968)

The I2C model is currently being elaborated and taken further in the context of the activities of the ICleF, but a first didactical application and verification has been realized within the Executive Master MIC (Master in Intercultural Communication) and a second one is in its final stage (within the project I2C – Improving Intercultural Communication, a project supported by the Swiss Virtual Campus which involves the development of a multimedia platform to improve IC competencies). The results measured with the yardstick of didactic effectiveness are more than encouraging. Some evaluations are currently underway, linked to the issue of relations between IC and second language competencies, IC in media and in the context of e-learning, etc.

The fields in which it is intended to apply the I2C model, and those with which useful synergies may be created, are numerous, several having already been mentioned in the context of projects and training quoted above: for example, those concerning the interculturality of/inside public institutions (linked for example to the issue of the integration of immigrants, of healthcare, etc.), in international organisations, in NGOs, in development cooperation institutions, in religious institutions and, especially, in educational institutions and in the media.

Conclusion

Intercultural communication, already extremely relevant today both as an object or field of scientific study and as a discipline, has the potential to become one of the major issues we will have to confront in the near future, not only scientifically, but also socially and politically. It is thus necessary to better structure the scientific discourse linked to IC, laying at its basis a solid epistemological and methodological foundation, able to value and allow more systematic analytical elaboration. Only by respecting these conditions can the scientific contribution be able effectively and operatively to be translated into competencies for those who, for example in an institutional context, find themselves needing to confront problems and develop the potential inherent in the intercultural encounters or clashes.

Acknowledgment

We would like to thank Manuel Mauri Brusa (University of Lugano) for the important contribution to the elaboration and clarification of the concepts and ideas at the

heart of this paper, as well as prof. Andrea Rocci (University of Lugano) and Dr. Peter Praxmarer (EMICC – European Masters in Intercultural Communication) for the valuable comments and the in-depth review of this paper.

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