PROBLEMATIZING THE NOTION OF CULTURAL MEMBERSHIP: THE CASE AGAINST THE INTER-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION CONCEPT

Timothy John Phelan

Most of us live like stand-up comedians on a vaudeville stage — the way an essayist does — by our humble wits, messing up, swallowing an aspirin, knowing Hollywood won't call, thinking no one we love will die today, just another day of sunshine and rain.

Edward Hoagland, 1993: 78

...while people's activity is directed, in the sense in which a theatrical performance is directed, they none the less often 'muddle through,' improvise, and make things up as they go along.

Renato Rosaldo, 1985: 20

The total integrity and apparent immortality of merging with a cause or a people like the comfort and confinement of having a single 'most basic identity,' is a fantasy of perfection and permanence, a dream sometimes brought to momentary but unforgettable life by a candle lit at a ritual, the flap of a flag, or the odor of onions and thyme sauteing in olive oil. These summon us to once again be the Jew, the Frenchman, The *Provensale*. These deeply felt moments are distorted by our primordial attachments, by our memories and desires. The 'once again' becomes 'still,' the moment forever. We are enchanted, and so forget that our epiphanies of identity are — like ethnicity itself — occasional, accomplished, transitory, and locally organized.

Michael Moerman, 1993: 96

Introduction

This essay is a critical examination of the intercultural communication concept.[1] Critical in the sense that it seeks to demonstrate the weaknesses of the intercultural communication concept — to show that

just as a case can be made *for* the concept, a case can also be made *against* the concept. It will not be enough to demonstrate that the concept leads us down the wrong path, however. Considerable suggestions must be made concerning the kind of research which can be conducted *instead* by scholars interested in the relationship of 'culture' and 'interpersonal communication.' The essay, thus, seeks to both deconstruct and construct.

Among academics in Japan who participate in the study of communication, the concept of intercultural communication, more than any other concept, garners the greatest interest (Furuta, Kume, & Hasegawa, 1992). Once certain assumptions are accepted, the case *for* intercultural communication strikes many people here as extremely compelling. The object of intercultural communication studies seems to be clear and uncontentious. Best-selling texts for college-level English language courses are concerned with this topic. Papers concerning intercultural communication attract large audiences at conferences. Whereas textbooks on interpersonal communication published in the United States are rarely translated into Japanese, numerous texts on intercultural communication are available in Japanese. Growing numbers of Japanese are being awarded higher degrees in speech communication in the United States; more often than not, their area of specialization is intercultural communication. Though many of these comments lack documentation, I believe they give an accurate rough-and-ready characterization. The point being made is that intercultural communication as a notion, a topic, an area of study, an interest, a field, a course, a subject for a book, essay, or conference paper is very alive and well in Japan today. This is no less true in the United States where almost every major university has at least one course concerned with some aspect of intercultural communication.[2]

The points I have to make in this essay, thus, may come as a surprise to many. But the concept of intercultural communication has been attacked before. No one since Ellingsworth (1977), however, has argued for the kind of radical surgery urged in this essay. Given that the mainstream approach to intercultural communication is deeply embedded in empirical social science, one can correctly predict that a critique of intercultural communication will encompass a critique of quantitative research methods. The problem, however, is deeper than this. A qualitative approach to intercultural communication must still accept 'intercultural communication' as a legitimate topic for study. It must still claim that a boundary can be and should be drawn between something called "*intra*-cultural communication' and something called '*inter*-cultural communication.' As long as this assumption is granted, it matters little whether the approach is qualitative or quantitative. The argument here will be that intercultural communication is not a legitimate research focus, regardless of approach. It is a chimera, a phantom, a camouflage. It hides more than it reveals. The view that the existence of something called 'intercultural communication' is undisputed needs to be disputed. I will raise questions about what is all too often assumed to be given and obvious. In the first part of this essay I show how intercultural communication is traditionally understood. This is followed by various arguments from scholars working within the terms of the intercultural communication project and those from without which demonstrate the weaknesses of the concept. Special attention will be given here to Huber Ellingsworth's (1977) critique of the intercultural communication concept. First presented in 1975, the ideas in this seminal paper remain extremely relevant and need to be brought to the attention of the academic community again.

Intercultural communication researchers, of which I consider William B. Gudykunst,[3] to be the exemplar par excellence, rely on cultural anthropologists to tell them what 'culture' means. Few authors demonstrate familiarity with the radical changes the culture concept has undergone within anthropology. Since the notion of culture used in intercultural communication is thus seriously out-dated, it is at this juncture that the most severe attacks on the project can be made. In the final section I will offer suggestions to guide the development of a field of culture and interpersonal communication studies, a field I see as replacing intercultural communication studies. The core of this field will be a conceptualization of culture which avoids an essentialism at odds with our post-modern world. The work of Varenne (1986), Krippendorff (1993a, 1993b, 1994), and Young (1994) will be of particular use here though I will draw on many other theorists in making my case.

It is now recognized that behind the mask of detached, disinterested objective research there are interpretative and subjective features which exert their influence in forms of which we are often not aware (Burman, 1994). As Blaikie (1993) concludes,

> In adopting an approach to social inquiry, the researcher is buying into a set of choices with far-reaching implications. They therefore need to be given careful attention. No one approach or strategy, and its accompanying choices on these issues, provides a perfect solution for the researcher; there is no one ideal way to gain knowledge of the social world. All approaches and strategies involve assumptions, judgments and compromises; all are claimed to have deficiencies. However, depending on where one stands, it is possible to argue their relative merits (p. 215).

From where I stand the case against intercultural communication has much to recommend it. I am aware, of course, that the kind of theory a person finds attractive or convincing is not simply determined by the arguments alone. There is a coming together of arguments and

something else which pre-dates them and which the arguments articulate. Theories grow out of a need. In my case there is a need to express my objections to the way intercultural communication constructs human agents, of which I am one. I have a need to tell my students and colleagues that the field of intercultural communication is not as helpful as it may at first appear. As Director of Publications for the Communication Association of Japan and editor of its two journals I wish to indicate to the members of our association that researchers concerned with 'intercultural communication' must from now on demonstrate familiarity with the challenges to that concept. Finally, I wish these remarks to be read in the spirit of Mark Twain who wrote, "It were not best that we should all think alike; it is differences of opinion that make horse races."

The Strange Concept of Intercultural Communication

Defining intercultural communication has not been a once-and-for-all task. People working in the field have struggled to create a meaningful definition. Whereas many disciplines are able to state what it is they are about, those who claim to be studying 'intercultural communication' often continue to restate the scope of the field anew in each paper they write.[4] Some definitions that have been proffered are: "communication between people from different cultures" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984, p. 14), "communication between participants different in cultural backgrounds" (Kim, 1984, p. 16), "communication between people of different cultural groups" (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, Wiseman, 1991, p. 248), "communication between members from different cultural groups" (Nicassio & Saral, 1978, p. 346), "communication between people from different sociocultural systems" (Gudykunst, 1987, p. 848), and "communication between members of

different subsystems within the same sociocultural system"(Gudykunst, 1987, p. 848). Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman (1991) offer the following explanation. I believe that the definition they give would be agreed upon by most scholars committed to working in this paradigm :

> We use the term *intercultural communication* to refer to communication *between* people from different cultural groups (e.g. communication between a Japanese and a Canadian). We would include ethnic groups as a form of cultural group and, therefore, communication between a Japanese-American and an African-American is intercultural, as we use the term (p. 284).

Even a cursory investigation of these definitions reveals that they all see 'culture' as something people 'come from', 'have' or are 'of.' Culture is something people seem to 'carry' around with them from place to place. Interpersonal communication is 'intercultural' because the communicators are 'from' different cultures. Communication is never defined as intercultural based on any particular characteristics of the communication itself. It is assumed that as long as the communicators are 'culturally different' their communication itself can justifiably be called 'intercultural.'

Distinguishing between intercultural communication and its logical opposite, intracultural communication, is necessary if the field of intercultural communication is to retain any distinctiveness. How is this separation done? Kim (1988) writes that,

> All communication. . . is viewed as 'intercultural' to an extent, and the degree of 'interculturalness' of a given communicative encounter is considered to depend on the degree of heterogeneity between the experiential backgrounds of the individuals involved. The distinction between intercultural and intracultural communication, therefore, is viewed not as a qualitative, categorical distinction, but as a matter of a researcher's particular operationalization of the concepts, or 'drawing of a line' between them (p. 12-13).

Kim writes that "all communication. . . is viewed as intercultural 'to an

extent.'" This unequivocally means that all communication *is* intercultural or can be viewed as such. But is this what Kim really believes? I do not think so. If all communication is intercultural then we no longer need the word 'intracultural' which she continues to use. By saying that it is up to the particular researcher to 'draw a line' between the two 'types' she is admitting that a line can be drawn. Indeed, unless a line is drawn, the field of intercultural communication dissolves. Being able to draw this line is everything.

To define intercultural communication is to define culture. A definition of intercultural communication *ipso facto* requires a definition of culture. Not surprisingly then, most articles, books, and papers in the field present some understanding of the term. It is necessary to spend some time looking at *how* culture gets defined within intercultural communication studies.

In their most recent text, Gudykunst & Nishida (1994) use Hofstede's (1991) metaphor to define culture as the "software of our mind." This is very similar to the definition Hofstede gave in his earlier book (1984) where he wrote that culture is the "collective programming of the mind" (p. 13). The use of the computer metaphor also appears in Gudykunst and Kim (1984).

> Our cultural unconscious can be understood only by detailed analysis. We automatically treat what is most characteristically our own as though it were innate. We are programmed to think, feel, and behave as though anyone whose behavior is not predictable or is peculiar in any way is strange, improper, irresponsible, or inferior (p. 225).

This is clearly taken — almost word for word — from Hall (1976) who himself seems to have gotten his ideas from an article in a popular magazine.

> In fact, according to Powers, man's nervous system is structured in such a way that the patterns that govern behavior and perception

come into consciousness only when there is a deviation from plan. That is why the most important paradigms or rules governing behavior, the ones that control our lives, function below the level of conscious awareness and are not generally available for analysis. This is an important point, one that is often overlooked or denied. The cultural unconsciousness, like Freud's unconscious, not only controls man's actions but can be understood only by painstaking processes of detailed analysis. Hence, man automatically treats what is most characteristically his own (the culture of his youth) as though it were innate. He is forced into the position of thinking and feeling that anyone whose behavior is not predictable or is peculiar in any way is slightly out of his mind, improperly brought up, irresponsible, psychopathic, politically motivated to a point beyond all redemption or just plain inferior (p, 43).[5]

Where Hall writes that people are 'forced,' Gudykunst and Kim say they are 'programmed.' The imagery is clear enough. Culture, whatever it is, impacts with indelible force upon people. Computers cannot program themselves. They are programmed by human beings. They do not have any say in what is done to them. They are passive. They are acted upon and show no resistance. To say that culture programs human agents is to adopt a strongly deterministic metaphor. There are other metaphors available. Swidler described culture as a 'tool-kit' (Swidler, 1986). Geertz (1973) called it an 'octopus.' Hannerz (1992) describes it as 'a flow.' In another place (1993), instead of using the strong verb 'program' Gudykunst uses the verb 'provide.'

> Because of our socialization into a culture and ethnic group, we share a large portion of our intersubjective realities with other people in our culture or ethnic group. These realities are sufficiently stable that we consider the shared portion as an 'objective' reality. . . . cultures provide rules for how to interpret the content of communication (p. 35).

It is interesting that he chooses to use the more deterministic vocabulary in a textbook for the mass market (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994). The weaker verb is reserved for a paper published in a book aimed at a much more limited, specialist audience.

If culture is as determining a force on people's lives as the computer metaphor indicates, drawing the line between intercultural and intracultural communication is simple provided one can determine the boundaries of cultural units. Intercultural communication as defined by the major theorists cannot avoid this issue. What kind of answers do they give?

Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Wiseman (1991), in the quotation noted earlier, indicate that 'Japanese' and 'Canadian' represent cultural groups. What do they mean by this? I believe we can read them to mean that a Japanese is someone 'from' Japan and that being 'from' Japan means 'having' Japanese citizenship. Gudykunst & Nishida have written elsewhere that, "The borders between cultures usually, but not always, coincide with political boundaries between countries" (1994, p. 18). This is similar to Hofstede's comment that,

> The word 'culture' is usually reserved for societies (in the modern world we speak of 'nations') or for ethnic or regional groups, but it can be applied equally to other human collectivities or categories: an organization, a profession, or a family (p. (1984, 21).

The notion that countries — nation states — *are* cultures reflects an idea first proposed in the work of Goldenweiser (1933) and later developed during and after World War II by theorists of the Culture and Personality school[6] who, according to Bock (1980, p. 107), despite disclaimers and occasional references to deviant individuals and groups, assumed that each society could be characterized in terms of a typical personality and that these characterizations could be compared.

Hofstede falls clearly in this tradition when he claims his research "shows that modern nations do have dominant national character traits which can be revealed by survey studies and by the comparison of measurable data on the society level. The mental programs of

members of the same nation tend to contain a common component" (1984, p. 29).

According to Wallace (1970) there are available two major conceptions of the relation of cultural and personality systems. Cultures can be viewed as either 1) homogenous, bounded units where individuals are assumed to share a uniform nuclear character (in Hofstede's terms, to tend to be either individualistic or collectivistic) or 2) environments characterized by diversity.[7] The tradition of which I believe Hofstede is a part and of which the field of cross-cultural psychology and cross-cultural communication are a part falls into the first of these conceptions. This tradition, as Wallace (1970) admits, is "unashamedly reductionistic. . . . It seeks to describe in individuals the classes of micro-phenomena that are the parameters of the classes of macro-phenomena, which the pure culturologist describes for groups" (p. 243).

The work of Inkeles and Levinson (1954) concerning national character should also be mentioned. They defined national character in their lengthy and sophisticated introduction to the concept as "relatively enduring personality characteristics and patterns that are modal among the adult members of the society" (p. 983).[8] Though they clearly state that such a thing as national character "may or may not exist," Hofstede seems to have read them as making a stronger argument. He writes (1986) concerning his own research that "all four (dimensions) were, in fact, fairly closely predicted in a review of the anthropological literature by Inkeles and Levinson (1969), originally from 1954, long before the data for the present study were collected" (p. 307). The tradition of research concerning national character and modal personality has had a profound impact on the study of intercultural communication. According to Gudykunst (1993), however,

a more scientific approach is necessary. (Gudykunst repeats the ideas in the following quotation in many of his papers.)

> It does not make sense to say that 'Yuko communicates indirectly because she is a Japanese" or that "Ruth communicates directly because she is from the United States." This does not tell us why there are differences between the way people communicate in the United States and Japan. There has to be some aspect of the cultures in Japan and the United Sates that are different and this difference, in turn, explains why Japanese communicate indirectly and people from the United States communicate directly (p. 65).

I have discussed this point in detail in a previous paper (Phelan, 1994a). Scholars working in the field of comparing interpersonal communication between two cultures (read, nations) are required to operationalize the culture concept. The concept is of little use to them unless it is capable of being statistically represented. Hofstede's theory of cultural differentiation is considered to be "the only schema of cultural variability that is quantifiable and directly related to communication" (Gudykunst, Chua, & Gray, 1987, p. 467).

We have found in this section that the apparently simple definition of intercultural communication as "communication between people from different cultures" involves the invocation of numerous controversial assumptions. To believe that one can study something called intercultural communication is to believe that people can and should be categorized according to their cultural background; that all people by their behavior cannot help but exhibit behaviors characteristic of their culture; that culture can be used as a code word for nation; that communication between people of different nationalities will *de facto* be different from communication between people of the same nationality. Few writers in the intercultural communication project state these points in these terms. I believe, however, that a careful reading of the literature indicates that intercultural communication is, in fact,

correctly characterized in these ways. Indeed, people who come to intercultural for the first time, those who have read perhaps only one book in the field, students who encounter intercultural communication through one of Gudykunst's books will certainly come to the conclusions I have described.

An attempt to defend this project has been made by Carbaugh (1990). He writes :

> Given their focus on group patterns, at times it may sound as if the authors claim, something like, "Whites speak one way, Blacks another." But note that the main concern in the studies is *patterns* in — and of — communication, which are *not linked in any deterministic way to a people*. People use various patterns, as well as create new ones of their own. ... People, at least on some occasions, and with regard to some features of the patterns, have some choice in the matter. To identify patterns, and to characterize them with regard to one group rather than another, is thus not to draw a deterministic link between people and communication patterns (p. 153) (*italics added*).

The question, of course, is then, if patterns do not have a deterministic link between people, what kind of connection do they have? What does it mean to say that certain patterns of communication are characteristic of a people even though they "need not necessarily be used by any one of them?" Is this possible? I do not think so. Carbaugh's attempt to avoid determinism fails. At best, he is arguing for a weak determinism. The implication of the passage above is that though people "on some occassions, and with regard to some features of the patterns, have some choice in the matter," on "other occassions, and with regard to other features of the patterns, [they] have *no choice* in the matter." This is the crucial point.

Deconstructing Intercultural Communication

At the 1993 International Communication Association (ICA) Conference in Washington, D. C. the author approached Huber

Ellingsworth and inquired about the circumstances surrounding his paper *Conceptualizing Intercultural Communication* (1977). He reported[9] that the "paper was received with great, considerable hostility. There was a panel with myself and some others. I don't remember who they were except for one, K. Sitaram. There was very little applause when I finished. No one spoke to me at the end." Given the content of Ellingsworth's paper *and* the context within which it was delivered, the response with which his paper was received is perhaps understandable. It also is a fact that speaks volumes concerning the field of intercultural communication. In 1975, when Ellingsworth delivered his paper in Oregon, the study of something called 'intercultural communication' was only just beginning to grow out of a prolonged infancy. The professional organization on intercultural communication, The International Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR) held its first conference in 1974. Its professional journal, *The International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* would begin in 1977. The Speech Communication Association's (SCA) *International and Intercultural Communication Annual* was first published in 1974. The ICA established a Division of Intercultural Communication (now Intercultural and Development Communication) in 1970. Its first chairman was on the panel mentioned above, K.S. Sitaram. It was within this climate that Ellingsworth made his presentation before a group of scholars and researchers who, as Ellingsworth said to me, "saw before them, an exciting adventure called the study of intercultural communication." In his paper (1977) he concludes that, "We might expect the honorable retirement of the term 'intercultural communication' in its various forms from course titles, publications, research designs, and organizations, at least in any specific or technical sense" (p. 105). These words must have been quite a shock to

those gathered together on that rainy day.[10]

Though Ellingsworth does indicate in this paper that human agents can be (and thus should be?) characterized according to demographic and sociocultural categories (p. 105) — an assumption I find controversial — generally speaking, the argument Ellingsworth makes in support of his suggestion to 'retire' the term 'intercultural communication' is powerful and convincing. Ellingsworth culled from the literature about intercultural communication five propositions or assumptions on which the concept of intercultural communication appeared to be grounded. He found all five of the propositions wanting and offered five revised propositions.

Propositions:	Revised Propositions:
(1) Intercultural communication (in its various stylistic forms) is a unique dimension of communication which requires special labeling, attention, methodology, and instruction.	(1) Except as a public relations strategy, the term intercultural communication should be used sparingly and then only as a post-hoc description of encounters where cultural differences became manifest, were recognized, and were successfully compensated for. As an a priori prediction of what will be the dominant aspect of an encounter, it must be advanced very tentatively.
(2) Cultural differences between communicators functions as boundaries or barriers which must be overcome if understanding and satisfaction are to be achieved.	(2) Cultural differences signify the need for accommodation in communication, but they are not arbitrarily either barriers or facilitators.
(3) Any given member of a cultural group is a potential interactor with any member of another culture.	(3) Training, research, and theory in intercultural communication should reflect the possibility that the population of participants is relatively small and identifiable.

(4) Learning about a cultural pattern is an important means of reducing uncertainty about the behaviors of a member of that culture.	(4) Culture learning is a useful background for intercultural contact: it may not predict behavior for a given situation, which is likely to occur in a synthetic third culture ambiance.
(5) Culture is primarily a phenomenon of region or nationality; national identity predicts culture.	(5) Nationality is one major dimension of cultural identity; it is not by itself a reliable indicator of the cultural behaviors of its citizens.

To my knowledge no one has responded completely to Ellingsworth. The closest 'response' I have found is in Gudykunst and Nishida (1979). Unfortunately, they only deal with the first proposition. They conclude,

> The question which must be addressed is: accepting which of the statements will yield the greatest promise for the field....Ellingsworth suggests that we accept the proposition that 'no communication is intercultural.' However, *given that we are academicians who specialize in intercultural communication,* obviously we opt for 'all communication is intercultural' (italics added, p. 98).

In other words, they decide that it is better to believe that 'all communication is intercultural' rather than that 'no communication is intercultural' because *that is what they study!* Someone who does not 'specialize in intercultural communication,' according to this logic, should choose the other option — 'no communication is intercultural.' Gudykunst and Nishida are concerned to show that the processes underlying *inter-* and *intra-*cultural communication are the same. Ellingsworth's argument, however, is that this very distinction may not be fruitfully maintained except perhaps in very rare instances and then only after the fact, *post facto*. The boundary between the two cannot (shouldn't?) be drawn. Gudykunst and Nishida are unable to see this point and, I suspect, for the same reasons those who first heard Ellingsworth's paper reacted with such hostility. To take Ellingsworth

seriously is to see that intercultural communication as a field is bogus and that interpersonal communication studies is sufficient for the task at hand.

Ellingsworth's five propositions before revision can be expanded upon and reordered in the following way. The ordering is meant to draw out their logical connections, something Ellingsworth did not seem to think necessary when he made his original formulations.

Proposition One : Culture as a "system of knowledge" (Gudykunst, 1991. p. 44) adheres to particular places such as nation-states. Some human beings will be 'socialized' or *in-culture-ized* in those places. This means that 'objective culture' will be inevitably, unavoidably, inescapably, irrevocably, and certainly 'programmed' into the cognitions of the people 'brought up' in those places. Individual differences, though present, are to be ignored. They get in the way. For the most part they are insignificant. Nations produce humans with their stamp on them. People cannot escape this programming, this molding and shaping of their internal organs. All people are members of a culture. If we want to know what 'culture' a person is a member of we can inquire into their nationality. Nationality and cultural membership are basically the same thing. All people end up 'carrying' their culture around with them, like a passport. This process is very much the case with people 'from' the United States of America and Japan.[11] (Proposition Five for Ellingsworth)

Proposition Two : People will travel from one country to another. It is useful to imagine that this is happening much more than it really is. After all, everyone wants to travel to exotic places. As long as people are curious they will be interested in hearing about the customs and mores of people in other places and times. They aren't interested in specifics. It is to our advantage as intercultural communication

specialists to encourage people to be interested in far away places. This is one way we can keep our jobs. (Proposition Three for Ellingsworth)

Proposition Three : Because people carry culture around with them and cannot help but express it — no matter how inappropriate it might be to do so — because people are in effect "cultural dopes' (Garfinkel, 1967) — problems will inevitably occur whenever people who are not carrying the same culture meet. (Proposition Two for Ellingsworth)

Proposition Four : The way to deal with these problems is to learn about other cultures and about how we have been programmed. We needn't try and overcome our programming. We can't. We just need to be aware of it and 'mindful' of it. (Proposition Four for Ellingsworth)

Proposition Five : The study of Propositions One through Four makes up the field of intercultural communication. All communication is intercultural. The field of interpersonal communication is no longer needed. (Proposition One for Ellingsworth)

Culture Beyond Intercultural Communication

The intercultural communication concept, as has already been mentioned, requires a prior understanding of the concept of culture. It is clear that intercultural communication studies as popularly and professionally conceived rests upon a shallow understanding of culture. For the most part, interculturalists take the easy way out by presenting a 'sturcture' as if it is an absolute fact that mechanistically determines behavior (Varenne, 1986b, p. 28). Instead of the rich understanding of culture found in much ethnography, "culture," as Agar (1994) writes, "is the dirty little secret of the field [of intercultural communication"] The term does massive work in organizing the intercultural communication literature and yet no one knows quite

what it means (p. 224).

> The old concept of culture does not work anymore. Its referent has turned problematic. . . . Yet intercultural communication, and many other fields, often use the term culture in the old-fashioned way to mean "a closed, coherent system of meanings in which an individual *always and only* participates." If this is what culture means, it applies to no one who would be involved in intercultural communication and probably to no one at all (p. 226).

One can see an echo of Ellingsworth in these remarks. Agar concludes his timely and very important discussion by stating that "culture is not something people *have*; it is something that fills the spaces between them" (p. 236). Ellingsworth discuss the culture concept in more detail earliev on in his paper.

> . . . the term culture, like communication, is plagued with denotative ambiguity and diversity of meaning. *Culture* is often used to designate a large general area of human activity and of scholarly concern, rather than an operational concept. . . . The communication scholar, seldom a well-grounded anthropologist of any persuasion, is likely to find himself pragmatically deriving definitions and concepts from a number of general and special viewpoints in anthropological science, without a clear picture of their compatibility or usefulness in dealing with the phenomenon he wishes to study (p. 101).

The field of intercultural communication has continuously equated culture with country. Cultural membership is thus considered to be the same as nationality. The desire to 'pragmatically derive definitions' is another way of saying that the proverbial cart is being put before the horse. Because scholars want to do empirical research, culture is most usefully defined by them such that they can at least take countries *to be* national cultures. This allows them to conduct research where they give out questionnaires to the citizens of two countries and then call their research *cross* - or *inter* - cultural. If they are prohibited from considering countries as cultures and from equating citizenship with cultural membership, they will not be able to do the rather easy and inexpensive research that is so important for career advancement and

the establishment of intercultural communication studies as a 'science.'

The autonomy and boundedness of culture howeves, is a matter of degree (Hannerz, 1992). Hannerz urges us to consider culture as an "ongoing debate" (p. 266) and writes that "There is something fairly arbitrary about bounding any culture-carrying unit of social relationships today" (p. 69). Cultures are not boxes within which people live (Dervin, 1993). There is no brute fact about persons that can plausibly constitute 'having a culture.' Culture is created and communicated by people but not in the way a virus is transmitted. Having a culture is not a physical reality like having a disease (Moody-Adams, 1994). "The quintessential reflective ability of human beings to fight back against their conditioning, giving them the capacity to respond with originality to their present context" (Archer, 1992, p. xxiv) must never be forgotten. We must resist the romanticist tendency to conceive people as possessing core identities which are somehow locked away in their inner depths (Gergen, 1991, p. 176). To say that culture viewed as an independent variable in relation to the human organism, 'determines' or 'conditions' behavior is to conceive the problem much too narrowly, if not inadequately" (Hallowell, 1962, p. 359). This last quote is from an article by an author who is generally *in support* of studying culture and personality. Hallowell goes on to say that "We know that to say *merely* that the individual acquires culture through learning in a socialization process is only a confession of ignorance as to what this process actually involves" (p. 364). He warns against any research which leads to the belittlement of human freedom. Krippendorff (1993a) is also critical of the kind of culture conceptualization found in intercultural communication.

> the scientific practice of rendering abstractions such as culture, power structures, communication technologies, various "—isms," and theoretical dimensions as variables deemed capable of explaining

human communication in large social systems (e., g., ethnicity explains. . ., a revolution causes. . .) constructs conceptual hierarchies of constraints whose causality derives solely from the dubious attribution of agency to abstractions (p. 263).

In other words, to argue that culture programs behavior is to commit the double fallacy of reifying an abstraction and then endowing that abstraction with casual power. Krippendorff continues,

> The rather widespread assumption that members of a particular culture or group think *alike,* that speakers of a language use the same communication code, and that individual knowledge is *shared* within a social system serves here as a methodologically convenient ground for creating the very similarities and differences that objectivist comparisons require. But, such assumptions also *stereotype human participation in them.* They moreover, separate the scientific observer from her object, obliterate the need for human agency, and in fact, make human communication virtually redundant, all of which *puts individuals into categories they are unable to negotiate* (either among themselves or with the scientist) *and from which they have no way to escape* (p. 263-264).

It is unfortunate but true that essentialist invocations of race, nations, genders, classes, persons and a host of other identities remain common in everyday discourse throughout the world (Calhoun, 1994a, p. 14). Of course, the challenges posed by projects of identity cannot be averted simply by asserting that those projects are caught up in essentialist thinking. With enormous nation-states, international disaporas, wide realms of personal choice, unstable and heterogeneous networks of social relations, mass media for the proliferation of cultural transmission and the sheer multiplicity of discourses attempting to name or constitute persons, the social basis for recognition has come under particular challenge (Calhoun, 1994a, p. 314). Nationality, for instance, must be unrelentedly shown to be anything but primordial. It is a construction, an ongoing one at that. As Calhoun (1994a) warns us, "Modernity has meant. . . the breakup — or the reduction to near-irrelevance — of most all-encompassing identity schemes" (p. 11). There was

a day when the romantic notion that people posses core identities locked away in their inner depths might have made sense[12]. That day has long past. The identificational logics which insist on separating complex and hybrid groups into their 'real' elemental parts as has been the case in Bosnia (Fairclough, 1994, p. 431) is not unlike the practice within intercultural communication of calling Japanese collectivists. The use of such categories creates a reality of cultural divisions which then require solutions, all of which are bound to fail because they heighten the cultural awareness that leads to contention (cf. Wright, 1994). I believe that in giving people a way to describe themselves — regardless of the accuracy of those descriptions — the categories actually begin to shape peoples' understandings of themselves. The act of defining a national cultural identity will in every case exclude some people, their ways of behaving and being in the world while at the same time obscuring the constructed and thus contestable character of that identity which has been placed upon them (Young, 1994, p. 715). We are suddenly no longer able to identify ourselves by ourselves. Our autonomy is taken away in the discourse of intercultural communication. We are forced to become an individualist if we are 'American' whether we think or feel we are or not. If we claim that we are not, we are deviants from the mean. The empiricism of intercultural communication studies leads one down this path. As Craig (1989) has written,

> Empiricism attempts to reduce action to a series of repeatable motions (operationalizations) the consequence of which can be predicted according to scientific theory. In doing so, it tends to distract from, and even to delegitimate inquiry into those aspects of action that require choices to be made in particular historical contexts where consequences can be projected only dimly and where, moreover, the ends as well as the means of action are always at issue. Questions of evaluation, of how to deal with the always unique and often messy human circumstances in which action takes

place... are removed to the background and even exiled from the realm of rational inquiry by technological thought (p. 108).

In postmodernity, heterogeneity is not based on foundational essences, but is a contingent articulation of the fluid and moving play of differences in which 'cultures' and 'societies,' tumbled as they are into endless interconnections, constantly construct and reconstruct themselves. (Ang, 1994, p. 207). In the end, culture must be conceived as ongoingly accomplished. Any understanding of culture must allow for differences between people in responding to situations, for unexpected opportunities to shape responses, for unplanned and unintended consequences, for ambiguity and uncertainty, for the fact that people improvise, take things as they come, go one step at a time, and play it by ear.

Directions Forward

It has been my principal purpose so far to suggest that intercultural communication studies is not deserving of the attention it receives. It is not simply that the paradigm is flawed in some correctable way. I have suggested that the operationalization of culture which is required by the terms of the project leads to unsatisfactory consequences. The need to 'draw a line' between *inter-* and *intra-* cultural communication in order to conduct research means the complexity of the relationship of human agents to forces beyond them is reduced to a simple determination. And this all in the name of supposedly finding patterns of behavior which can characterize an entire nation.

Is the answer to argue that all communication is intercultural as do Gudykunst and Nishida? Or should we take the opposite route and say that no communication is intercultural? Obviously, no matter which option one chooses, the result is somewhat the same: the distinction

becomes meaningless.

I believe that one's answer to the question should be made by referring to the meaning of 'culture.' Anthropologists and social theorists have suggested for some time that the complex effect of overlapping cultural influences in all places in the world make it reasonable to think that ultimately each individual possess his or her own culture (Moody-Adams, 1994, p. 307). If this is the case, then *all* communication *is* intercultural. Indeed, I find this quite compelling but think the word culture can be put to better use by separating it completely from the mental states of individuals. All people differ in terms of their values and identities. Saral (1979) has an important point to tell when he writes,

> Could it be, then, that intercultural communication is merely human beings' desperate attempt to communicate with their many known and not-yet-known selves? What I am suggesting is that intercultural communication is ultimately nothing but explanation of one's many selves. ... In order to become integrated individuals, we need not suppress one self or identify with another; rather, we need to create an environment in which we can flow back and forth among our various selves without feeling stuck at one place or addicted to a particular mode of experiencing. Each of us is a combination of various cultures in the form of our multiple selves; each of us, like a distinct culture, is governed by unique dimensions of reality. If we want communication across our multiple selves, we need not only to acknowledge the uniqueness of these distinctive dimensions but also to free ourselves from our deep rooted addiction to sensing and coding reality in rigid and narrow patterns. Then and only then, can we allow ourselves to experience the rare ecstasy of encountering ourselves in our entirety. (p. 83).

This understanding of intercultural communication seems to have been ignored by the 'leaders' in the field. As with Ellingsworth's critique, the upshot of what Saral is saying is that quantitative research using the methods of cross-cultural psychology and statistical social psychology are hardly appropriate. And so, granting Saral's point is, I think, not unwarranted. But culture must also be seen as external to

agents.

I believe the approach of Derne (1994) has much to offer. Writing within the young field of the sociology of culture, Derne's asks us to see culture as a constraining pattern. Varenne's (1989a, 1989b, 1989c) approach to understanding America is similar. He urges us to study *people* who live in the United States; not 'Americans.' We are to look at the constraining pattern in terms of which human beings must construct their lives when they interact in the US (1989a, p. 6). Derne summarizes his approach and clarifies its distinctiveness in the following way.

> While the culture-as-values paradigm asserts that internalized values guide actions, I argue that culture constrains by driving social practices that individuals confront as external constraints. Because I focus on how social practices constrain by attaching consequences to appearing to be motivated in certain ways, my account of cultural constraint is consistent with a recognition that frameworks for understanding action are not fully shared. Rather than shaping individual behavior by providing actors with goals, frameworks for understanding action constrain by defining the social understanding that actors must contend with. Rather than emphasizing how culture fixes the internal motives of actors, I locate the constraining force of culture in the power of society apparent in social practices (p. 282).

How are people constrained to communicate in particular places around the globe? This strikes me as an extremely simple yet powerful question. It certainly is the case that we are not able to communicate in any way we please. Instead of locating the cause of this inside people and then having to resort to claims about the socialization process, we are free to see that people communicate in particular ways not because they want to or have to but because they believe it is in their best interest to do so. Derne's ideas need to be explored further.

The social constructionist approach used by Holstein & Gubrium (1984, p. 258) also encourages us to ask some interesting questions. For

instance, how and under what circumstances is 'communicating like a Japanese' or 'not communicating like a Japanese' constructed and used to legitimate communication? People make claims to be speaking *as* one kind of person or another for rhetorical reasons. Cultural membership can be used as an excuse for one's behavior. Exploring how this is done with regard to communication would be very profitable.[13]

I believe Lotman's (1991) understanding of culture as a *semiosphere* has much to offer. He talks about the static nature of the area at the center of the semiosphere and the vitality and continual change at the periphery. The center is the point from which the constraining forces flow. Hannerz (1992) also deals with this topic of center and periphery in his understanding of modern societies.

Pearce (1989) has developed an extremely rich typology of communication types. He talks about communication as monocultural, ethnocentric, modernistic, and cosmopolitan. Such a typology is much more fruitful than that proposed by the *inter-*, *intra-*cultural dichotomy.

In conclusion, along with Krippendorff (1993), I don't anticipate that message-driven communication research will disappear. "People in positions of authority are all too eager to embrace deterministic reality constructions that can offer them the prospect of forcing predictability and controllability onto others" (p. 40). I hope however that this essay has gone at least a small way towards encouraging some to 'get off the intercultural bandwagon.' The variation which so interests intercultural communication studies does not come about as the result of the division of a given social entity into a fixed range of meaningful identities. It represents the infinite play of differences which make all identities and all meanings precarious and unstable.

Any relative fixation of those identities and meanings is not the expression of a structural predetermination within a cultural order. Rather, since the cultural is the site of potentially infinite meanings, it always *exceeds* the limits of *any* attempt to constitute 'society', to demarcate its boundaries. Cultures never accomplish total closure, never fix meanings and identities with permanence, never succeed in imposing order over the 'muddle' within which we all exist. The study of communication must always remember this.

NOTES

1. And, by implication, the cross-cultural communication concept.
2. See Kitao & Kitao (1989) for a full but uncritical history of the 'field' of intercultural communication.
3. See Phelan (1994a, 1994b) for a critical examination of Gudykunst's work, especially his understanding of culture.
4. Note how Ting-Toomey (1993) diverges radically from her previous conceptualizations of intercultural communication. In this paper she uses the term to refer to communication which has 'a certain degree of newness, or dissimilarity.' All communication, she further writes, can be viewed as 'intercultural.' "Every communication episode, to a certain degree, can be framed or reframed by the interactants as carrying some element of novelty" (p. 73).
5. Edward T. Hall is usually the author mentioned as the first to write explicitly about intercultural communication. His book *The Silent Language* published in 1959, and generally listed as the first work in the field, has been influential in setting the agenda for the field of intercultural communication. At the same time, it is important to understand that Hall's work was not invented de *novo*, but rested heavily on work begun with a series of colleagues for the specific purpose of training American diplomats about to be sent abroad. Understanding *The Silent Language* and the effect it has had on the study of intercultural communication requires knowing about the history of a particular group of linguists and anthropologists at a particular place, the Foreign Service Institute, and time, 1944-1946.
6. See Bock (1980) for a history of the study of culture and personality. Chapter 5 (pp. 107-129) on 'National character studies' is especially relevant. Archer (1992) is also a good resource for a critical examination of the culture and personality tradition. Benedict's monograph (1943) demonstrates the background to this area. Racial

differences were raised to the level of determining factors during World War Two. It was the role of anthropology and related fields to demonstrate that cultural membership rather than race was the cause of behavior.

7. "Culture, as seen from this viewpoint, becomes not so much a superorganic entity, but policy, tacitly and gradually concocted by groups of people for the furtherance of their interests, and contract, established by practice, between and among individuals to organize their strivings into mutually facilitating equivalence structures" (Wallace, 1970, p. 24).

8. Mead's article in the same volume is also important. She writes, "Any member of a group, provided that his position within that group is properly specified, is a perfect sample of the group-wide pattern on which he is acting as an informant" (1962, p. 402).

9. With Mr. Ellingsworth's permission I was able to record our conversation onto cassette tape.

10. According to Mr. Ellingsworth's recollection.

11. The literature never discuss in detail if, when, and how a person might 'lose' their original cultural conditioning. This possibility is always lurking in the background, however. On the one hand culture is seen as overpowering people. On the other hand, when researchers discuss the respondents to their studies they often mention that their subjects have not been 'overseas' even once. Is there concern over a confounding effect due to travel? It is not clear. The concern in any case, indicates that researchers are trying to find people for their studies who are provincial; people who do not have a very broadminded approach to the world. The search is always for the modal person, the stereotype.

12. See Gergen (1991) for a fine study of the self under modernity.

13. Bowers and Iwi (1993) have established how this might be done with their examination of the discursive construction of society. I am suggesting we look at the discursive construction of various 'ways' of communicating.

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