TAKING STOCK IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: WHERE TO NOW?

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Describing Culture Dialectically

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Culture is likely both the most and least useful construct that communication scholars employ regularly. Academics and laypersons alike rely on the idea to make sense of social behavior. For example, nearly everyone understands the remark, "it's a cultural thing" offered as an explanation for another's unrecognizable actions. Yet, when pressed to clarify what the term means more precisely, people (including academics) generally squirm. Attempts to pin the concept down have met with some success, particularly in guiding variable analytic study. Despite this however, many of these restricted definitions do not adequately represent culture as it is widely experienced. Consequently, we are left to wonder about additional ways of conceptualiz- ing culture- ways that may benefit communicaton scholars in both research and pedagogical contexts.

Not long ago, Martin and Nakayama (1999) challenged intercultural communication researchers to draw outside the box by thinking dialectic- ally. As they describe, a dialectical perspective involves moving beyond rigid, paradigmatic thinking to embrace contradictions that appear mutually exclusive. For example, recognition that culture can be both a useful and useless concept *at the same time* is itself a example of dialectic thought. In this essay, I take up the challenge to think dialectically about intercultural communication. Specifically, I argue that in addition to adopting a dialec- tical perspective in order to integrate various research traditions, as Martin and Nakayama have done, scholars of intercultural communication may benefit by thinking dialectically about culture itself.

CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION STUDY

As with all areas of communication research, intercultural communication study finds roots in World War II (for a detailed history, see Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). When the field first began, there were at least 164 definitions of the anthropological concept of culture in circulation (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). The concept had first been defined by Tylor in 1871 as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (*sic*) as a member of society" (1871/1958). As such, it was taken up and developed by anthropologists in a myriad of ways. For example, culture was defined as "any socially inherited element in the life of man (*sic*), material and spiritual" (Sapir, 1924), "a historically-derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group" (Kluckhohn & Kelly, 1945), "the characteristic activities and interests of a people" (Eliot, 1948), and "the body of learned behaviour which a group of people who share the same tradition transmit entire to their children" (Mead, 1955). To be certain, so many different definitions resulted in a muddle that can be traced to Tylor's original delineation of the concept; although he insisted that culture was a complex whole, he outlined a list of disparate traits that fostered a sort of "everything but the kitchen sink" approach to studying culture.

Into this definitional morass stepped intercultural communication scholars. Initially, most researchers responded by adding to the number of definitions and extending the purview of culture. For example, Hall (1959) expanded the concept by defining culture as all communication while Rogers and Burdge (1972) carried on the tradition of viewing culture very broadly by defining it as "material and nonmaterial aspects of a way of life, which are shared and transmitted among the members of society". During the "birth" of the field throughout the 1970's, culture was defined and used liberally; intercultural communication scholars conceptualized culture in terms of behaviors, beliefs, and values and applied it to social groups based on race, class, gender, and national identity. As Moon described it, "there is evidence that at least during the decade of the seventies, what was defined as 'culture' . . . was less constrained" (1996, p. 72).

However, as the decade came to a close and the field moved toward its "adolescence," many researchers reacted against such loose treatment of culture. Again, it was felt that more rigor was required, thus a move was made to restrict the concept and its application. Although textbooks

continued to characterize culture very broadly (even to this day—e.g., Samovar & Porter, 2004), mainstream researchers began to treat culture primarily as a psychology shared among members of a single nation-state. For example, the researcher most influential in the mainstream of the field during the 1980's, William B. Gudykunst (Hart, 1999), viewed culture as an individual's "theory of what his (or her) fellows know, believe, and mean, his (or her) theory of the code being followed, the game being played, in the society into which he (or she) was born" (Keesing cited in Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 16).

Relatedly, a paradigmatic example of how culture came to be defined and treated within the field is the highly influential (Hart, 1999) monograph-length study by Hofstede (1980) entitled, *Culture's Consequences*. This massive study analyzed 117,000 survey questionnaires from sixty-six countries and has provided *the* model for how quantitative / neopositivist intercultural communication research is done. According to Hofstede, culture is defined as the "collective programming of the mind" (p. 13), and is distinguished from individual-level (psychological) programming and universal-level (biological) programming. By analyzing the response variance in work-related preferences according to respondent nationality, Hofstede identified the cultural profiles of sixty-six nation-states along four "universal" dimensions: individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance.

Following Hofstede's model, most intercultural communication research has aimed to identify cultural (i.e., national) variablity in communication-related practices such as persuasion (e.g., Burgoon, Dillard, Doran, & Miller, 1982), self-monitoring (e.g., Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1987), intimacy expression (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1991), and conversational style (e.g., Kim et al., 1996). This research is typcially undertaken by surveying individuals about their values, beliefs, and/or behavioral preferences and because an international sample is used, culture becomes a *de facto* variable. With such treatment beginning in the 1980's, mainstream intercultural communication study effectively transformed the culture concept. No longer does culture typically refer to the wide-ranging idea of anthropological origin, but instead usually indicates a 'mental program' suited to variable-analytic treatment.

Of course, this view of culture is not invoked by all research within the field. Despite the continuing predominance of quantitative / neopositivist approaches to intercultural communication study (Kassing, 1996), the 1990's witnessed a significant return to a qualitative / interpretive paradigm and the emergence of a critical / cultural studies tradition (Starosta & Chen,

2003). Within these traditions, the culture concept has not been tapered so radically.

For cultural studies scholars, the idea of culture remains very broad. "In cultural studies traditions, ... culture is understood *both* as a way of life—encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power—and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth" (Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992, p. 5). In comparison, scholars working within a qualitative / interpretive paradigm have narrowed the domain of culture somewhat. Most distinctively, culture from this viewpoint includes symbolic, but not material systems. According to Geertz, culture is "a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms" (1973, p. 89). The emphasis of this type of intercultural communication research is to describe how communication constitutes culture through situated practices that create and affirm shared identity, in addition to shared meaning (e.g., Carbaugh, 1990a; Philipsen, 1987).

Although shared sense-making is a feature of culture common to both the neopositivist and interpretive perspectives, its ontological status is quite different. If culture is a 'mental program', then it exists *within* the minds of people. However, if culture is 'shared pattern of meaning', then it exists in the symbolic behavior *between* people. Viewed in this manner, the neopositivist definition is more restrictive because it limits culture to an aggregation of individual understandings, rather than relationally negotiated and dynamic understandings.

As we have seen, intercultural communication scholars have invoked multiple definitions of culture since the field's inception and have transformed those definitions over the years. Although no definition is more correct than another, like a tool, some may be more useful for certain applications. Thus, I do not submit that any one of these definitions is "wrong," but rather that there remain some important gaps in the ways that they encourage us to imagine culture.

THE LACUNAE

To begin, the quantitative / neopositivist view of culture as a 'program of the mind' is certainly most widespread and perhaps most limited. Although well suited to variable analytic study, it encourages us to treat culture in ways that do not resonate with our lived experience. In particular, two

important limitations of this view of culture include both *compromising separation* and *fixedness*.

At its heart, the concept of culture is a "complex whole" (Cronk, 1999), a characteristic that renders it difficult to study scientifically. As scientists go about searching for order in the social universe, a perceptual tendency is to see parts instead of wholes because parts can be more readily understood and studied than wholes. For example, it is easier to analyze the limited and direct consequences of artificially elevated levels of oxytocin in the brain (e.g., do mice spend less time in isolation? does it improve the symptoms of autistic boys?) than it is to understand how the brain directs social interaction. Such reductionism certainly leads to more precision, and is a hallmark of scientific progress, however its ability to foster a meaningful understanding of wholes remains doubtful.

In the case of culture, some conceptual separation is, of course, a prerequisite to any sort of systematic study (otherwise, how could specific conclusions be reached if culture simultaneously comprehended everything?). Even so, a definition that limits the complex whole of culture to a mental program can be seen as overly restrictive in many contexts. If culture is a product of group life, can researchers ever hope to understand it fully by studying individuals alone? Indeed, this is the problem of a reverse ecological fallacy with which neopositivistic cultural research has continually wrestled and never satisfactorily solved[1].

A second important limitation of the quantitative / neopositivist view of culture is that of *fixedness*. Fixedness refers both to the treatment of (observer-developed) cultural maxims as stable and natural representations of social life and to individual behavior ostensibly governed by such maxims. When humans are metaphorically 'programmed' by culture, there is no room for change to operate, either at a group- or individual-level; an individual's actions are already specified by the program and the program itself is replicated through the process of intergenerational transmission.

However, as the dawning of a global village makes obvious to everyone, cultures *do* change (see Parameswaran, 2002; Zwingle, 1999). Regardless of how it is defined, the national culture of Japan (or India, or England, for example) is not the same today as it was one hundred years ago. What was once a cultural maxim for Ruth Benedict (1946) (e.g., "every Japanese man must have a son", p. 255) is no longer one (or more properly, never was one to begin with!). In reality, maxims instead represent dynamic and heuristic outlines of culture—useful but never static.

Correspondingly, features of culture never fix individual behavior. Individuals possess agency—the power to follow or to subvert prescriptive

rules or norms. Bandura (2001) points out that such a characterization, though hardly deniable, is surprisingly rare in most traditional social scientific models. Psychologists are just now adopting an agentic perspective and it has become the basis of a paradigm shift. This shift no longer ignores that, "the human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive" (Bandura, 2001, p. 4). When this agentic perspective is applied to culture, it becomes obvious that "members [of a culture] are [not] . . . mere repeater stations for the culture" (R. Young, 1996, p. 37). Consequently, mainstream intercultural communication study can benefit from a definition that actively incorporates, and gets scholars to theorize about, the shape of agency and change in culture.

While a quantitative / neopositivist view of culture places many restrictions on the concept, a critical / cultural studies view offers relatively few. This "everything but the kitchen sink" approach has the advantage of providing the conceptual freedom necessary to critical scholarship (e.g., the culture concept must be treated dynamically if it is to cut across investigations of history, politics, aesthetics, race, space, literature, music, and television). Even so, this strength can also be seen as a limitation in certain contexts. Specifically, if we ever hope to achieve some degree of the modified modernist goal of intersubjectivity (for objectivity, particularly in the context of cultural research, can be nothing other than illusory at best and an ideological ploy at worst) then we must agree to look in the same sorts of places for the same sorts of things. In this context, such a slippery view of culture is not ideal, therefore some additional winnowing of the concept is useful.

Lastly, there is the qualitative/interpretive definition of culture to consider. Scholars working in this tradition have winnowed the concept, but not to the extent that their quantitative counterparts have. From this viewpoint, culture is constituted by symbolic, but not material systems. As such, the strength in this approach lies in providing a robust conceptual middle ground (i.e., not too narrow, not too broad) relative to the other two traditions. Nevertheless, the culture concept as treated here may benefit from further specification. For example, if culture is viewed as a system of symbols, it might be useful to outline the character of its elemental parts and their interrelationships. Or if culture is seen to exclude behavior, then what constraints, if any, does it place on individual action?

As previously stated, I do not submit that there is anything "wrong" with the above described (or any other) conceptualization of culture used within intercultural communication study. Rather, I am simply arguing that there is room for more. Because gaps remain regarding the ways in which

current definitions encourage us to imagine culture, both research and pedagogy may profit from the introduction of yet another view of culture to the field. In particular, I believe there are dividends to be paid in marrying culture with a concept that possesses an even richer history: dialectics.

A DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE

Although a dialectical perspective will be familiar to many readers, a brief review is useful at this point nonetheless. To begin, dialectics is one of the oldest of philosophic concepts, dating back to 900 B.C. (Lavine, 1984). In antiquity, Heraclitus, Lao Tzu, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were among those who wrote about it, and more recently Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Bakhtin have further developed the idea. Although each philosopher has defined dialectics in unique ways, the basic notion is one of *opposition*. Much like the four elements of antiquity (i.e., earth, air, fire, and water), things exist as part of a larger whole, and more specifically, in dynamic, push-pull relationships. For example, water was believed to offset the force of fire, and air balanced earth. In this manner, constant opposition is seen as a necessary and defining characteristic of dialectics.

Although important in many ancient philosophies, dialectics didn't develop into a full philosophical worldview until the nineteenth century, thanks in large part to the work of Hegel. According to Hegel, although human concepts are grounded in opposition, people are nonetheless drawn to reconcile such opposition through a *synthesis* of contradictory positions (i.e., *thesis* and *antithesis*)[2]. Ideally, synthesis preserves the respective truths embodied within the thesis and antithesis while transcending their opposition. For example, an individual's feelings toward birth and death may be identified and dealt with over a lifetime in a dialectical process of change and negotiation as he or she journeys in search of an appreciation of life that embodies both the joy of birth and the despair of death (i.e., a synthesis). As such, dialectics are not only defined by opposition, but equally by *time* and *transformation*. Dialectics are *never* static in part because perfect synthesis is unachievable in a world where contradiction and change structure rationale thought itself.

Following Hegel, Marx subsequently developed dialectics perhaps most famously with his notion of dialectical materialism. Marx saw Hegel's dialectical worldview as too idealistic, thus he sought to locate it in a material world defined by social class. Rather than treat human consciousness as a Hegelian abstraction, Marx viewed consciousness both as a product

and means of transforming extant social structures. Because capitalism alienated and oppressed workers, the state of consciousness that came about as a result of this material oppression was the very vehicle to change it (i.e., let the workers rise up!). According to Baxter and Montgomery (1996), Marx's application of dialectics to concrete practices of society provided a systematic explanation of *praxis*—a dialectical characteristic by which people create possible futures constrained by past actions.

As apparent in the above discussion, dialectics in its most general sense is a metatheory about the process of relating entailed in human activity (Georgoudi, 1983). As Baxter and Montgomery describe, "Dialectics is not a 'theory' as that term is traditionally used. . . It does not represent a single, unitary statement of generalizable predictions. Dialectics describes, instead, a small set of conceptual assumptions" (1996, p. 6). As such, dialectics has been widely utilized within contemporary intellectual circles (e.g., Adams, 1977; Andersson, 1995; Billig, 1987; Ho & Chiu, 1994; Nuckolls, 1998; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; Valverde, 1996), including interpersonal communication scholarship (e.g., Baxter, 1988; Goldsmith, 1990; Montgomery, 1993; Rawlins, 1992). Despite this rich and well-known tradition however, a dialectical perspective has largely been neglected within intercultural communication study and has not yet been fully utilized by communication scholars in order to understand the culture concept.

TOWARDS A DIALECTIC DESCRIPTION OF CULTURE

Because dialectic metatheory is widely known, it is not the case that the ideas behind dialectics, or even dialectics themselves, have *never* been applied to intercultural communication study. As stated at the outset, Martin and Nakayama (1999) have previously challenged communication scholars to pursue the use of dialectics in cultural contexts and others have followed suit (e.g., Collier, 2002; Drzewiecka & Halualani, 2002). Thus despite the fact that dialectics remains underdeveloped within the field, the stage has nonetheless been set for describing culture dialectically.

Before Martin and Nakayama's (1999) appeal, it could be argued that several approaches to intercultural communication study were already consistent with dialectic metatheory. For example, postcolonial studies—a field positioned within the broader critical project of cultural studies (Shome & Hegde, 2002)—has long claimed that the "understanding of any contemporary social context involves its location within the history and geography of colonialism" and that such contexts "are always the product and the

production of complex lines or relations of struggle" (Grossberg, 2002, pp. 368–9). Consequently, it has been said that "postcolonial studies offers what might be seen as a positive understanding of difference: instead of "x not y or y not x" we have "x and y and . . ."" (Grossberg, 2002, p. 369). As such, the adoption of a postcolonial outlook has led some communication scholars toward a dialectic-like dissolution of modern binaries (e.g., Hegde, 1998; Lucaites & McDaniel, 2004).

Another example of an approach to intercultural communication study already consistent with dialectic metatheory is coordinated management of meaning (CMM). CMM was adopted as a theory of intercultural communication by Cronen, Chen, and Pearce in 1988. Although the theory has its roots in North American Pragmatist philosophy, not dialectics, it nonetheless has resulted in a dialectic-like outlook on culture: Cronen, Chen, and Pearce propose that cultures should be considered as "patterns of coevolving structures and actions" as well as "polyphonic" (pp. 78–79). As such, the dialectic core ideas of time, transformation, and—to some extext—contradiction emerge here as lenses to better understand culture.

Although CMM theorists have not explicitly evoked dialectics, others studying culture from a dialogic perspective have. For example, Carbaugh (1990b) used the term in articulating the connections between identity and communication across cultural contexts. As he observed,

[C]ultural communication is heard as a dialectically elastic process, including tensions between creation and affirmation, the individual and communal, closeness and distance, equal and unequal, resource endowed or deprived, the social goals of automony and union, or between personal and social orders. (pp. 6–7)

Although such plain use of dialectics is exceptional within intercultural communication study, Carbaugh's work (1990a) is representative of a dialogic approach important here because it provides a foundation for understanding culture in dialectic terms.

Because a dialogic approach to intercultural communication treats interactions as culturally intersected sites of social construction, it has provided a counterpoint to mainstream (i.e., psychological) intercultural orientations. As such, it is well suited for extension by dialectic metatheory. As Young (1996) points out, the key to undertanding culture is not some abstract set of psychological rules but rather the "experienced character of communicative action" (p. 83). When interactions are considered in this light, the "fragmented and contradictory character of culture" (p. 79) can be seen. As an example of this point, Malhotra and Crabtree's (2002) analysis of focus

group dialogue resulted in the identification of several tensions present within contemporary Indian culture—including tensions between tradition and modernization, as well as spiritual and material trends.

As this last example illustrates, a dialogic approach to intercultural communication study is at least consistent with, if not already informed by, dialectic metatheory. Indeed, Collier (2002) has labeled some of this work "dialectic" even if many authors have not used the term. Despite this, we still stand to benefit from the development of a dialectic description of culture. Dialectic metatheory has proved itself valuable in so many other contexts that I believe we must carefully nurture its connections to culture. As the work of Simons and Chabris (1999) demonstrates, people have a difficult time seeing things for which they are not looking. Thus although intercultural communication scholars may continue making observations that have a dialectic flavor to them, until our characterizations of culture are more formally informed by dialectic metatheory, we will continue the risk of "inattentional blindness" to potentially valuable means of understanding culture.

THE DIALECTICS OF CULTURE

Because a dialogic approach to intercultural communication study provides the best foundation for understanding culture in dialectic terms, it makes sense to begin here. From this viewpoint (as well as from the more broadly treated paradigm of a qualitative / interpretive research), culture is constituted by symbolic, but not material systems. Although neopositivist intercultural communication research has not operated with this view of culture, it should be pointed out that this definition is not incommensurate with quantitative methodologies nor, more importantly, with the practice of good science. Indeed, if we revisit the original anthropological attempts to narrow the domain of culture down to a definition appropriate for scientific practice, we find the same view of a culture as symbolic system.

Returning to the most seminal review of the culture concept, Krober and Kluckhohn (1952) identified what they termed the "correct" idea of culture for the purposes of science: a collective, symbolic discourse. More specifically, they argued that culture should be identified by its most important and distinctive element: values. In their words, "values provide the only basis for the fully intelligible comprehension of culture, because the actual organization of all cultures is primarily in terms of their values" (p. 171). This view of culture was similar to that advocated by Parsons, the great

figure of social science in America who pushed to reform anthropology in the modernist image. Parsons championed the study of symbolic *systems* because, as he wrote,

> The connection between a particular symbol and its meaning is in the causal sense always arbitrary. The only intrinsic element common to symbols and their meanings is of that order. And this can never be grasped by the isolated study of particular symbols, but only in terms of their mutual relations in systems (1937, p. 484)

Thus, following Krober, Kluckhohn, and Parsons, as well as scholars working within a qualitative / interpretive paradigm, culture can be defined as a system of symbols, especially values.

What now happens when we select this defintion yet replace the structural-functionalist metatheoretical commitments with dialectic ones? To begin, a dialectical grounding of culture embraces contradiction in ways that have typically been resisted. For example, although Parsons did not think that symbols in a cultural system were necessarily consistent, their potential contradiction does pose a problem for system integration. From a dialectical perspective however, contradiction is not a characteristic of culture to be explained away; it is instead a defining feature. As Baxter and Montgomery clarify, "contradictions are inherent in social life and not evidence of failure or inadequacy in a person or in a social system" (1996, p. 7).

What does contradiction in a symbol system look like? Consider the most famous paradox of values, that of individualism / collectivism. Representative of the central contradiction between centripetal and centrifugal forces in dialogue, individualism encourages autonomy and independence whereas collectivism supports community and social connectivity. Human beings are, by nature, social creatures yet they operate in physically sovereign bodies. Consequently, humans can never be entirely independent from, or entirely dependent on, one another. Instead, different culture systems pattern unique arrangements of the values to function as temporary solutions that help their members adapt to the surrounding material constraints[3].

As an example of one such dynamic arrangement, consider mainstream U.S. culture. Even though it is characterized almost entirely as individualistic (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; E. M. Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 1988), collectivistic currents nonetheless exist in the system (e.g., Grimm, Church, Katigbak, & Reyes, 1999; Padgett, 1999; Stephan, Stephan, & Cabezas de Vargas, 1996). Undoubtedly, the present, temporary resolution

of this fundamental, dynamic tension favors individualism because it is a more materially adaptive value (i.e., it is supported by the nation's low population density and economic wealth). However, as those material constraints change, and as members of the system react against the extremes of individualism, the resolution will shift (see Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). The point is that because no culture is ever "purely" individualist or collectivist (Triandis, 1995), grounding the culture concept in dialectics will help us embrace, rather than retreat from, such a contradiction.

In addition to framing contradiciton as a fundamental feature of culture, dialectic metatheory also has us embrace change. Like contradiction, change is a characteristic of culture that is problematic for a structural-functional approach, though not for dialectical one. In contrast to treating change as an observation to be accounted for, dialectical metatheory transforms it into a fundamental feature- one that is itself connected to contradiction.

If a culture can be characterized in part by the dynamic tension between contradictory elements of the system, such as values, then it is this same tension that functions, in turn, as the engine of cultural change. As Nuckolls (1998) explains, the central weakness of structuralism is that it doesn't come to grips with motivation—"independence and dependence, for example, are not simply arbitrary tokens arranged in meaningful contrast to each others; they are deeply motivating value orientations. The unresolvable opposition between them generates the kind of ambivalence that can be felt." And it is this felt ambivalence that, in turn, provides motivation for the continued movement within the system.

To illustrate the idea that contradiction can serve to motivate ongoing change, consider the simultaneous drives toward consolidation and secession in Los Angeles. As describe by Keil (2001), much political discourse has centered on the governance of L.A.—a city "caught between the Scylla of privatized settlement and the Charybdis of generalized regional urbanization" (p. 23). In what Keil calls "the dialectics of fragmentation and consolidation," centripetal movements in city charter reform have been greeted with centrifugal movements in municipal secession. As the city sought charter reform to expand its executive capacity in order to better meet the needs of international economic competition, secessionist movements emerged in an attempt to preserve autonomy and fend off 'big government'. As Keil notes, "the fragmented city is only possible if the shadow governance of the consolidated city is maintained in critical services like water" (p. 33). Likewise, there are practical ceilings to the responsibilities that city hall can manage, thus neither movement has (or will ever ultimately)

triumph completely. Instead, their unity in contradiction will continue to provide motivation for further debate, reform, and redistricting.

When our understanding of culture is pinned to dilectical foundations, change does indeed become integral—but that is not to suggest that flux or even disorder carry the day. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) point out, "to argue that change is inherent in social systems is, at the same time, to recognize stability. Stability and change form a dialectical unity" (p. 10). Thus one way of characterizing a culture system may be by describing the relatively stable (though never final) "solutions" it provides for a given contradiction (e.g., the allocation of values to gender; see Nuckolls, 1998). Even so, because both change and contradiction are ever-present, culture will never be a fully ordered nor fully integrated system; as in Nuckolls' words, culture is "a problem that cannot be solved."

Related to the fluidity of cultural form is the fluidity of meaning within the system. In his landmark book *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein (1953) used the notion of "language-games" to demonstrate that a symbol's meaning is never fixed, but is instead found in relationship to other symbols and to the pragmatic carrying out of life. As such, meaning emerges as a negotiation between people and through socially situated activity. Meaning is thus always potentially multiple and this feature affords movement to the symbol system. As researchers aiming to map the order of a cultural system, this point should remain foregrounded. There is no ultimate authority as to the meaning of a symbol, but there are of codes of signification (Giddens, 1984) and narrative conventions (Harré & Gillett, 1994)—on whose behalf power has undoubtedly intervened (S. Hall, 1997)—that *attempt to* fix meaning. As such, these partially fixed patterns can be seen as the stuff of culture to map for researchers operating from either a qualitative / interpretive or a quantitative / neopositivist perspective.

Seen in this light, this stuff of culture is very much unlike a nation-state with clearly defined territorial borders. Instead, because meaning emerges between people, culture may be fairly said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication (Dewey cited in Peters, 1989). As such, it is a liminally situated system of symbols partly distinguishable from yet wholly interconnected with other such symbol systems. Within a dialectic framework, this is recognized as totality: "the assumption that phenomena can be understood only in relation to other phenomena" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14). What appear as separate cultures acheive their distinction only through their connection to and contradiction with each other. For example, the symbol system in which many African-Americans participate emerged as a contrast to and in order to contest the white, mainstream U.S. culture

in which they also participate (Dubois, 1903/1996). Because different cultures are marked by different patterns of signification arising from different networks of symbolic interaction, they are configured in a complex and heteroglossic fashion across geographic and social space.

Having now described culture as a liminally situated and dynamic system of symbols containing elemental and opposed patterns of signification, one last area where dialectical metatheory proves most valuable is in understanding the relationship resulting between a culture and its members. In contrast to a structural-functional view of the relationship, one in which people follow some unspecified combination of universal-, cultural-, and individual-level scripts (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Samovar & Porter, 2001), a dialectical perspective suggests instead that people enact agency within a field of culturally prefigured patterns. Like a well-worn path through the woods, individuals often follow the markers, but may sometimes find it more suitable to blaze their own trail.

Consider, for example, the case of the woman who climbed up the house. As reported in the book *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* (Holland, Lachiotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), a local woman arrived at a house in Nepal to be interviewed by the authors. As one author went downstairs to greet her, the woman "somehow crawled up the vertical outside wall, made her way around the balcony to an opening in the railing, came through the opening, and sat down" (p. 10). The question, of course, becomes why did this woman climb up the wall when such entry was unprecedented in the community and when the woman had no reputation for unusual behavior? Clearly, no cultural- or individual-level script for this conduct existed. However, that is not to say that culture was irrelevant to her actions.

As Holland *et al.* (1998) explain, the woman was of lower caste and the house belonged to a higher-caste person. In this community, locals are socialized through discourses about food and its vulnerability to the pollution of lower-caste people. Consequently, the explanation of culture holds that the woman so internalized these discourses that she avoided the first-floor kitchen entry by forcing herself up the wall and away from the sin of polluting another's hearth. However, there is the additional matter of social positioning to consider. It is also likely that the logic of hearth pollution was not embodied in her, but instead imposed upon her by the other locals on the scene. Perhaps she simply did not want to face the imagined consequences of entering the kitchen.

The case of the woman who climbed up the house illustrates that the relationship between culture and action is clearly complex. So complex that no non-dialectical explanation is satisfactory. On the one hand, there

are the constraints of culture to consider, but on the other, there is the agency of actors to accept. As Jessop explains it,

> Structural constraints always operate selectively: they are not absolute and unconditional but are always temporally, spatially, agency- and strategy-specific. (Likewise) agents are reflexive, capable of reformulating within limits their own identities and interests, and able to engage in strategic calculation about their current situation. (1996, p. 124)

Thus, in order to best acknowledge the validity behind both of these opposed approaches, a dialectical description of their relationship is required.

Viewed dialectically, the woman who climbed up the house was both constrained and agentic. Indeed, she had come up with a spectacular improvisation in the face of a problematic situation. In the usual circumstances of community life, she would not be allowed to enter the house, yet she needed to get to the second-floor balcony.

> Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18)

Seen in this light, culture comes to be one source from which to fashion the stuff of action. "One's history-in-person is the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18).

The dialectic between cultural determinism and individual agency brings us to the heart of intercultural communication study. When culture is understood as a symbol system, not only do patterns of communication come to constitute culture, but such patterns are in turn *praxically* determined by culture. As Baxter and Montgomery explain, "the actions of people from the past are reified and become instantiated in a culture's normative expectations and institutions, thereby assuming a reality of their own that dynamically frames subsequent communicative choices by social actors" (1996, p. 59).

THINKING DIALECTICALLY ABOUT CULTURE IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGY

Transforming our idea of culture by pinning it to a dialectical foundation doubtlessly leads to many questions regarding the implications of this discussion for methods of research and pedagogy. More to the point, what are we supposed to do *now*? In true dialectical spirit, I will resist reproducing the monologism of traditional inquiry by pretending that only a certain number of responses are appropriate and that I am somehow the authority on this issue. Rather, I hope that heurism is the main value of this essay and that the reader will decide what implications the conceptual shift has for his or her own research and teaching practices. Even so, I am not without my own ideas, thus I will offer some as fodder for continued thought and discussion.

In my view, the methodological implications are two-fold. First, if we view culture as liminally situated and not contained within the minds of individuals, we must seek to examine culture in public, not private spaces. Survey techniques have become the lifeblood of most mainstream intercultural communication research yet such techniques are not well suited to examine symbol systems. They can of course provide reports of individual behavior and/or sense-making, therefore they are not irrelevant to investigations of culture. However, more direct observations of the system come in the form of public texts. Thus, much more communication research should systematically examine texts qua culture using or adapting extant methods of textual analysis.

The second methodological implication of shifting the culture concept regards the nature of the analysis itself- namely, techniques should be chosen or modified so that the dialectical nature of the symbol system can be observed. This means a shift away from representing samples via measures of central tendency alone and toward representations that better reflect diversity. As Baxter and Montgomery (1996) summarize, "the specific method of gathering and analyzing data is not the crucial issue. Whatever method is chosen, however, must capture the intrinsic dialectical quality of multivocality" (p. 227).

Provided these implications, what might some forms of cultural inquiry look like? I offer two examples. First, in an attempt to describe mainstream U.S. American cultural values, Ersig-Marcus and Cargile (2004) content-analyzed a representative sample of television commericals. Although no text or set of texts will ever completely stand for an entire culture, especially

one as large and complex as a national culture, advertising texts are nonetheless one important part of mainstream U.S. culture (Pollay & Galllagher, 1990). Consequently, this study sought to depict the value-appeals used in nationally broadcast commericals. However, rather than rely on traditional coding procedures with its emphasis on manifest content and intercoder reliability, the authors modified the protocol so that latent content (i.e., value-appeals) could be coded and that a variety of readings of such content would be represented. The result is a polyphonous "map" of dialectically-related values seen to frame many U.S. television commericals.

A second example of inquiry fitting the present conceptualization of culture is a grounded theory investigation of values framing long-term care decisions in a Nikkei (Japanese diasporic) community (H. M. Young, McCormick, & Vitaliano, 2002). As a family of related techniques, grounded theory is especially promising for the investigation of culture as a text-based symbol system because it aids researchers in identifying, in both a systematic and inductive manner, empirically verifiable patterns (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By applying grounded theory to the texts produced by in-depth interviews with a representative sample of participants in the caregiving community, the authors found that as a result of a dialectic "between forces of integration into the broader culture and reconnection with the culture of origin, ... services have evolved over the past few decades from the original program design that emphasized traditional Japanese culture and values to more eclectic Japanese-American-based services that incorporate a blended culture and new values" (p. 46). As such, their findings demonstrated "dynamic relationships among cultural expectations, historical context, and service evolution for a group of members involved in the caregiving experience" (p. 53).

Although these research project examples are too brief and undoubtedly raise additional questions beyond the scope of this essay (e.g., is culture observed exclusively in the form of latent, and not manifest, text content? what texts, if any, are private?), they hopefully demonstrate the potential of inquiry informed by a dialectically-grounded symbol system view of culture. This view and the inquiry it engenders can play a distinct yet complementary role in the continued investigation of culture and communication.

In addition to intercultural research, adopting a dialectically-grounded view of culture also has implications for intercultural pedagogy; the manner in which we teach about culture can shift in ways that are both subtle and profound. Some shifts include embracing contradiction, understanding connectedness, emphasizing totality, and agentic liberation.

In learning about culture, one place where student understanding often stalls is in coming to terms with contradictory trends. For example, many textbooks offer self-assessment scales regarding cultural values or world-views. Because some students may score high and others low on the very same scale, confusion sometimes results regarding which cultural groups are represented and who qualifies for membership. Operating with structural-functional assumptions, educators may subsequently feel pressure to explain away such inconsistencies by noting individual variation or citing test validity issues. Using dialectic assumptions however, such inconsistencies can be embraced, rather than denied. As a result, students can more fully integrate their cultural knowledge. One student commented about this sort of integraton after learning several narrative themes common among dominant and non-dominant cultural groups in the United States (e.g., "liberty and justice for all" and "liberty and justice for some"). When asked to list what was memorable about the class, she wrote:

Number one, [I'll remember] being able to handle opposing points of view without wigging out. This has been a major move towards multiculturalism. Before, I thought that eventually one conclusion had to be reached. Now, I understand they can both co-exist.

Alongside the embrace of contradiction, a dialectic description of culture also facilitates a deep understanding of connectedness. If culture is liminally situated, and if the whole of culture is constituted by elemental and opposed patterns, so too are cultural groups. From this vantage point, it becomes easy to recognize that seemingly distinct groups are nonetheless interdependent. For example, Rodriguez notes that "for years, the definition of a white person was simply someone who was not black. Black and white idenities are inseparable" (2003, p. M3). Indeed, because of the connectedness between the cultural group categories "black" and "white," defining whiteness is a simultaneous exercise in defining blackness. As one white student observed, "this class really opened my eyes up to where I stand in the world, as opposed to others, and how that affects others."

Conversely, other students also noticed that giving voice to African-American experiences simultaneously provided meaning to whiteness. As one student of color wrote regarding the difficulties some of his white peers had in validating his stories,

I would have to say that coming into this class there were a lot of things that I knew but there were a lot of things that I didn't understand. . . I now see

that some white people don't want to feel that racism is still going on in the world. When you said the white man started crying at the end [of the video, "The Color of Fear"] because he didn't want to believe that another man could treat another man badly, that helped me to understand white people's point of view a little better.

By utilizing a dialectic view of culture, students may be better prepared to see the connections among cultural identities. In addition, they may also be better prepared to participate effecively in conflictful cross-cultural dialogue.

When student conversations about their own culturally- (e.g., racially-) grounded experiences "get real", conflict can often result (cf., Rich & Cargile, 2004). One reason for this is that students typically identify with experiences that are (or could potentially be) their own while struggling to deny those experiences they see as "other". While use of a dialectic description of culture does not end the possibility of such conflict, it may mitigate some of its destructive potential. With emphasis on the totality of culture (i.e., wholes comprised of elemental patterns both connected and opposed), students are offered a way out of a conventional dilemma: rather choosing sides, their task becomes recognizing the truth in all sides of the conflict and understanding the ways in which these multiple realities constitute the whole of their cultural quandary. When attempting to do this, students may exhibit greater patience with each other because they see the need to listen rather than argue. In the words of one student, "I know this class has helped me to understand white people a little better. I may not agree with their perspective on the world, but I can at least listen to their point of view and accept it as their experience without lashing back with my own opinion."

One last example of a pedagogic shift that can occur with the adoption of a dialectically-grounded view of culture involves recognizing our capacity for agentic liberation. In the context of exploring race as culture, many students believe that any talk of history only serves to stir up ill-will; they say that they are liberated from the past yet their often defensive reactions demonstrate otherwise. Fortunately, the idea of praxis can provide liberation from this predicament—a way to acknowledge both the impact of history and the possibility of creating new futures. Indeed, the idea of praxis shows that we are not trapped by culture and are thus not condemned to re-live the past. Nevertheless, as with any action, our present and future are praxically constrained by the past. Thus our future is not fashioned out of thin air, but with the resources our past has provided us. By understanding

this dialectic of cultural determinism / individual agency, students can begin cultivating their own capacity for action vis-à-vis their culture, both past and present.

CONCLUSION

In the view promoted here, culture can be described as a liminally situated and dynamic system of symbols containing elemental and opposed patterns of signification which praxcially determine the behavior of social actors. As such, this characterization continues to support systematic inquiry while enhancing the resonant quality of both our pedagogy and research. Because dialectic metatheory has proved itself valuable in so many other contexts, it is my hope that by nurturing its connection to culture, our understanding of this construct so central to intercultural communication study has been enlarged.

NOTES

1. Although Hofstede (1980) proposes a solution to this problem, the solution is statistical in nature and does not address the underlying issue of using individual-level data to generate a description of group life (i.e., culture).

2. Although Hegel is most often associated with the celebrated dialectical triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (Leach, 1968), it was actually J. G. Fichte (a predecessor of Hegel) who, following suggestions of Kant, developed and coined the terms (Findlay, 1962).

3. For a discussion regarding the impact of material circumstances on culture, see Murphy & Margolis (1995) and Yang (1988).

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