

Book Review

Principles of Intercultural Communication

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This work is a remarkable synthesis harvested from an extensive repertory of writings in anthropology, sociology, semiotics, and communication theory. While mainly intended as an introduction to interpretative notions that can assist one to sift through the wide range of explorations offered on cultural diversity, even one knowledgeable of related areas of investigation will encounter suggestive and provocative insights throughout the almost 300 pages of this book.

As a teaching instrument, one would find it difficult to find a more accessible and clearer presentation for students. Each of the ten chapters is roughly of an equally manageable length. And each begins with a focus on a “principle” of explanation, starting with a well stated problem and definitions of basic terms, followed by analyses of its nature, evidence for its operative presence in different ways and levels within experience, along with a development of some of the main implications of each explanatory notion. Also of great value is the author’s inclusion of the etymological origins of more obscure terms along with carefully explained definitions, so that a novice can better follow the author’s development.

The end of each chapter offers a relevant historical example to show how the principle examined is pertinent in a given context to illuminate aspects of cultural phenomena, along with further cases that illustrate cultural mentalities to which the reader is encouraged to apply the principle being presented. A relevant bibliography to each chapter is also offered that indicates the author’s main sources and gives the reader indications where to further explore the issues. Moreover, at the end of the monograph there is a serviceable glossary of terms, along with a detailed index.

Chapter one begins with reflections on what is termed the “punctuation” principle, which connotes not only “hard” but also “soft” boundaries—the former referring to physical and political frontiers, the latter to the complex tacit presumptions that comprise the texture of cultural distinctiveness. Chapter two shifts to a general consideration of knowledge, and strives to illustrate how both “objective” and “subjective” aspects must be

combined under the description of a principle of “uncertainty,” in order to acknowledge the “processual, relational, and contradictory nature of intercultural communication” (35). This acknowledgment of a residue of indiscernibility concerning predictive and explanatory disclosure within cultural interaction establishes a flexible framework so that the principle of “performativity” may be explained in chapter three. The unified degrees of performativity are analyzed in terms of motives, actions concerning the seeking of principal means to attain objectives, and operations concerned with incidental means and factors to accomplish original intentions (68). In terms of the desire for intercultural communication, this implies a certain hermeneutic circle between the self and another, in which reciprocal interaction implies proximate and distant experience in terms both of spectator and actor (67). Language, whether verbal (spoken or written) or nonverbal, is the matrix through which such relationality is established, and which involves a culture’s distinct interaction with environment, artifacts, para-language (intensity and range of sound), kinesics (gestures), proxemics (distance), haptics (mode of touch), and chronemics (whether dominantly monochronic or polychronic in understanding time) (52–55).

Chapter four proceeds to examine the mental space or cultural gaze that serves as the grounding for an experiential interpretation of figures that arise from other cultural contexts. The key notion used to unify the main aspects of these issues is that of “positionality.” In short, considered narrowly, the principle implies the range of attitudes, values, norms, mores, laws, and unifying worldview espoused within a cultural matrix. Viewed more comprehensively, however, it denotes the complex of factors through which another culture may be engaged, thus requiring continuing adjustments of a given culture’s authoritative claims to truth, as well as its structuring of power to maintain these claims (95–98). These reflections open up issues concerning the principle of “commensurability” in the following chapter, which explores how the interface of a linguistic complex within relational contexts can result in not only a better comprehension of a distinct culture as other, but also of one’s own. Attention is given to the intimate relation of image-schema portrayals, conceptual explanations, and symbolizations. Each respectfully finds its proximate ground within human bodiliness, the human mind, and uniquely human semiosis. It is clearly confirmed that “only when they are taken together that they make it possible for humans to make and understand meaning,” and “intercultural communication is a process of agreeing on what meaning is” (120).

Chapter six opens a new phase in the reflections by elaborating on the “continuum” principle by which absolute polarizations and contradictory antagonisms can arguably be alleviated and superseded by understanding differences as being shared by opposing cultures in different ratios, thus permitting one to imagine different yet unified orders of contrarities (137–149). An astute analogy is proposed by relating sharp oppositions to digital, and integrative oppositions to analog modes, of communication (148–150). Chapter seven further explores the transcending of rigid dialectical oppositions by elucidating the “pendulum” principle, an illuminating metaphor that implies a continually adjusting oscillation to find a mean that

avoids simplistic caricatures of one's cultural other, because communication is a "praxis" that constantly modifies the boundaries of consciousness (174).

Further refinement is offered in chapter eight, which explores the "transaction" principle. Here emphasis is placed on going beyond contrasts of in terms of mere polarization and compromise. Rather, flexible collaboration exists only when benefit is mutual, and the change accepted is constituted by a true exchange through the labor of the communication. Such collaboration fosters, as chapter nine indicates, true optimality for the contrasting cultures involved by opening the possibility of an exponential increase beyond what is expended in the original communicative engagement. Thus, an indication that true intercultural communication is operative will be a synergetic augmentation of exchange that does not violate the core integrity of the other culture's deepest distinctiveness or that of one's own (227–236).

Appropriately, the final chapter examines the main implications of this valuable synthesis. However, attention is granted as well to the guiding principle "sustainability" to better reconcile tensions between universalist versus relativist emphases. Successful avoidance of misconstrued visions of humanity in the future will require that one not permit homogenization to displace conservation of true cultural diversity, or a blind belief that all aspects of differentiation between cultures are equal in weight or essential to the enduring nature of a given culture's uniqueness, especially if such are antithetical to any reconciliation with some of the deepest enduring common factors of human existence. This is why in exploring the tensions between tolerance, trust, and resistance, the author succinctly considers anew the portrayal of five major approaches to critical manifestations of human liberty.

While disavowing simplistic universalist unifying approaches that jeopardize the integrity of true cultural diversity, or a capitulation to purely utilitarian and consequentialist indifference toward any profoundly unifying common inclinations and measures for the future of the human endeavor, Klyukanov astutely points to the valuable, flexible notions of the "golden rule" and "golden mean." Both have a remarkable history in confirming universalist and particularist pressures, and each arguably has been acknowledged and operative, tacitly or explicitly, in virtually all modulations of human enculturation. Ironically, by consistently meditating on the human historical condition, Igor Kluyakanov has not only offered a provocative, accessible, and stimulating introduction to some serious issues, he has also laid the foundation for further reflections on the paradox of human cultural uniqueness and the nature of latent unifying aspects of human experience. If it is true that "the very existence of cultures depends on their ongoing interplay" because "stability is the result of change," it is equally true that "we can never be certain that we have the final truth, the one and only generalization" (177, 219). However, the latter affirmation is arguably true and beyond reproach only in the sense that we can and must attain enduring certitudes not subject to any contradiction, even though they may be subject to further refinements and precisions.