10
Sociological approaches to intercultural communication: exploring the ‘silent zones’

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10.1 Introduction
Intercultural communication scholarship is an interdisciplinary endeavour, and sociology - the study of society, social relationships, social interaction and culture (Calhoun, 2002) - has contributed a great deal to intercultural communication scholarship, both historically and contemporaneously. To attempt to identify all sociological approaches is beyond the scope of this chapter. We therefore identify and describe four areas of research with roots in sociological concepts and theories, and then highlight the ‘silent zones’ in intercultural communication scholarship, discussing challenges for future researchers.
10.2 Sociological approaches

There are several identifiable ‘moments’ in sociological theorising that have impacted intercultural communication research, including: theoretical conceptualization, intergroup contact, conflict and attitudes, sojourner adaptation and immigrant assimilation, as well as recent critical studies.

10.2.1 Conceptualization

One of the most influential sociological concepts in intercultural communication theorising is Simmel’s (1908; 1921) and later Schütz’s (1944) concept of ‘the stranger’ (Cooks 2001; Rogers, 1999). Simmel’s stranger was originally conceptualized as someone who has not always been in the society, is both an insider and outsider, reflecting Simmel’s conceptualization of society: groups of individuals at varying degrees of social distance from one another. This focus formed the foundation of the traditional (early) definition of intercultural communication: ‘a communication relationship between two or more people who are dissimilar’ (Rogers, 1999, p. 60). Gudykunst, with graduate training in sociology, introduced the concept into U.S. intercultural communication scholarship (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984) as ‘the key intellectual device to broaden the meaning of intercultural communication’ (Rogers, 1999, p. 69) to include many types of cultural groups--ethnicity, race and even organizational culture or the culture of the deaf. This conceptualization was accepted by many intercultural communication scholars and spawned years of related research.ii
We should note that some scholars now question the utility of Simmel’s notion. For example, Marotta (2012) argues that Simmel’s category of ‘stranger’ reflected a position of power and privilege, excluding disenfranchised migrants, refugees etc., and Harman (1988) suggests that in postmodern globalized society strangeness ‘is no longer a temporary condition to be overcome, but a way of life’ (p. 44), defined by mobility and multiple identities. These critiques led Cooks (2001) and others to adopt more critical theorizing of intercultural encounters (described later in the chapter).

10.2.2 Intergroup contact, conflict and attitudes

Early conceptualizations emphasized the group membership of individuals in intercultural encounters and emphasized that this group membership (e.g. nation, ethnicity, race, etc) was a primary factor in the interaction processes and outcomes (Gudykunst, 1986). However, this focus (and terminology) gradually shifted from ‘intergroup’ to ‘intercultural’ communication (Gudykunst & Shapiro, 1996, pp. 20-21) and to individual attitudes (e.g. stereotypes, prejudice, ethnocentrism) – over objections of some scholars. For example, Landis and Wasilewski (1999) noted the shift and admonished that ‘sociological and political theorists are clamouring to be heard’ (p. 560).

An example of the social psychological focus is the extensive research on the contact hypothesis and various conditions affecting attitude change, particularly in interethnic and interracial encounters (e.g. Pettigrew et al., 2011) and for recent investigations, Nshom’s (2016) study of the effect of intergroup
contact on Finns’ prejudice toward Russian immigrants. Another example of social-psychological perspective is the research based on social identity and its relationship to linguistic practices in Communication Accommodation theory (e.g. Ng & Stolte, 2017).

However, there are a few communication approaches that incorporate the macro level societal/context of intergroup encounters. For example, Y. Y. Kim’s (2005) model of interethnic communication emphasizes that communicators are always embedded in hierarchical levels of context (e.g. national, regional, neighbourhood, institutional and so on), and one can understand interethnic communication only by considering the impact and input of these various levels. e.g. Lee’s (2012) study of communication between Hakka and other ethnic groups in Taiwan, and de Vries (2002) study of ethnic tensions in Fiji and implications for ethnic cohabitations.

10.2.3 Sojourner adaptation and immigrant integration

By some accounts cultural adaptation of sojourners (strangers) and immigrants is the most theorised concept in intercultural communication research (e.g. Dutta & Martin, 2017) and a few contemporary investigations of intercultural contact are based explicitly on Schütz’s concept of the stranger. There are at least three important sociological influences in this area of research, all building on the notion of the stranger.

First, a less emphasised element of Simmel and Schütz’s work is the notion that interaction between strangers involves uncertainty and anxiety, due to cultural differences and lack of familiarity with cultural rules. As Gauthier (2009) points out,
Gudykunst’s Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory (AUM) builds on this concept and attempts to explain (and predict) how individuals manage to balance anxiety and uncertainty at optimum levels in order to communicate effectively in intercultural encounters (e.g. Gudykunst, 2005). Using AUM theory, Samochowiec & Florack (2010) investigated the impact of predictability and anxiety on the willingness to interact with a member from an unknown cultural group.

Second, intercultural communication scholars were also influenced by Simmel’s student, Robert Park’s (1928) concept of the ‘Marginal Man’ (sic), an individual who lives in two different cultural realities. Park’s concept was later extended to ‘the sojourner’, who visits another culture for a period of time but retains their own original culture, leading to studies on U-curve of adjustment, culture shock, re-entry shock, etc (Fuhse, 2012; Hart, 1999).

Unfortunately, Park’s concept of the ‘marginal man’ remains unrelated to his later theory of the assimilation process and to the wider theoretical approach of the Chicago School (Fuhse 2012, p. 641), e.g. Blumer’s theory of symbolic interactionism, and later Milton Gordon’s (1964) theory of assimilation, a third area of influence in intercultural communication studies. Park and Gordon theorised that successful acculturation of immigrants depends on their incorporation into host community networks, i.e., the development of their relationships with host nationals leads them to adopt the host definitions of situations, leading then to a lessening of ethnic divisions, and eventually the attainment of status equality. Similarly, a more recent approach, explicitly based
on Simmel’s stranger and the work of Gordon and Park, Fuhse (2012) emphasizes the centrality of personal relationships and networks in the successful adaptation and integration of migrants into host communities. He argues that any ‘theory of interethnic relations has to link two levels: the relational level of relationships and networks, and the symbolic level of cultural differences, ethnic categories and symbols of demarcation’ (p. 640), noting that previous work has rarely embraced these dual levels. In a similar vein, Horgan (2012) revisits the stranger concept and introduces the notion of ‘strangerness’ — emphasizing the element of relationships among strangers as a better theoretical description of contemporary fluid and mobile intercultural encounters, that opens up ‘conceptual space to examine conditions where strangerness is present, where it emerges, where it intensifies and where it diminishes’ (p. 613). Y. Y. Kim’s integrative theory of adaptation (2005, 2008), like Fuhse’s work, integrates the macro sociocultural elements along with the micro interpersonal elements in a systems approach to adaptation, e.g. Cheah et al.’s (2011) comprehensive study of adaptation of Bosnian refugees.

10.2.4 Critical theorists
More recent developments of sociological theorising come from European and U. S. critical theorists in the late 20th century. As has been fully described elsewhere (e.g., Halualani et al., 2009; Halualani & Nakayama, 2010), many intercultural communication scholars rejected the earlier micro (interpersonal) and acontextual focus of intercultural communication scholars. They called for closer attention to historical specificity and contextual grounding.
(González & Peterson, 1993; Lee et al., 1995) and attention to the impacts of ‘larger structures of power (governmental, institutional, legal, economic, and mediated forces)’ (Halualani & Nakayama, 2010, p. 2). They promoted a re-theorising of culture as ‘sites of struggle’ based on power relations and ideologies (Collier et al., 2001; Cooks, 2001) and once again turned to sociologists, specifically the European critical theorists. For example, Moon (2010) cites Foucault’s (1972) notions of power and knowledge in her study of the genealogy of the field, rooted in colonialism and U. S. imperialism (p. 34). Similarly, Hasian (2012) extends the biopolitical work of Foucault (1977, 2003) in analysing the legal and cultural arguments used to abuse Filipinos during the Philippine-American War. Critical scholars also problematise the notion of adaptation as a ‘power neutral, linear process’ (Moon, 2010, p. 41) and pursue critical studies of immigrant adaptation and diaspora (e.g. Le Pichon, in this volume).

Critical scholars also focus on language and power in studying intercultural encounters (e.g. Ife, in this volume). Based on Habermas (1996), Striley & Lawson (2014) theorise communication orientations of privilege in showing how White discourses (de)construct Australian Aboriginals.

More recent Critical sociologists, e.g. Patricia Hill Collins and Bonilla Silva, are also integrated into intercultural communication research. For example, Willink et al. (2014) chart new methodologies for Critical Intercultural Communication research, based on Collins’ Critical Race Theory and Moon (2016) and other scholars’ studies of white identity have often relied on Bonilla-Silva’s (2010) work.
10.3 The way forward: silent zones in intercultural communication research

Consonant with a critical approach to intercultural communication and shifting from a static nation-orientation (e.g., Hofstede’s [1991] framework) to an ever-emerging contextual-orientation, current intercultural communication research is committed to interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research and bringing about “‘multiculturalism without hierarchy’ (Asante, 2003). Rather than being confined to ‘student-convenience sampling’ (primarily from Europe and America) (Merkin, Taras, & Steel, 2014), we echo those who call for progress towards achieving multi-accentualities and restoring polyphony (Alexander et al., 2014). In this spirit, we now identify seven ‘Silent zones’: never-researched or under-researched sub-domains/aspects (both physical/material and abstract/conceptual)--of intercultural communication research and suggest avenues for future scholarship.

10.3.1 Representation of culture

We, the human race, practice different cultures, and speak in a wide variety of languages. However, the different geographical locations, languages, and cultures/cultural practices are not represented equally in the discursive spaces. Recent studies show that North America, Europe, and East Asia received more attention in published literature than the rest of the world. Countries from Latin America, Africa and Asia (except for east-Asia) represent more than 60% of the global population but receive significantly less attention (Worldometers, 2018). For example, approximately 2% of the recent articles published in 5 primary culture and
communication journals focus on African, and Southern and Central American countries/cultures (Dutta & Martin, 2017) and more than 100 countries have never appeared in those journals. In terms of linguistic diversity, more than 90% of the languages spoken are in Asian, African, Latin American and Pacific regions and 500 out of 6,500 living languages are on the brink of extinction (Simons & Fennig, 2018). According to UNICEF, around half of existing languages will be lost by the end of this century—a serious concern (Austin & Sallabank, 2011). Similarly, local/indigenous cultural communication behaviours, preferences (various forms of songs, dances, theatrical performances, art and craft artefacts) and practices (e.g., cultural paradigm, awareness, mythology, oral narrative, and religious practices) are also experiencing severe challenges in this neoliberal world (Alexander et al., 2014). Not only is the geographical representation of culture unequal, but scholars of underrepresented regions are also constantly facing challenges to publish their scholarship. For example, Miller, Kizito and Ngual (2010) noted the struggle of non-western (particularly African) scholars in the world of academic publication. Such limited attention and research—engagement potentially lead to lack of theoretical inquiry, awareness, and knowledge about under-represented regions; this then further delegitimises less-known cultures and practices. The complexity and nuances of the cultural dynamics, linguistic diversity, religious and spiritual practices warrant academic attention, specifically to less represented regions and their cultures.
10.3.2 Socio-economic and structural disparity and global missions

Increasing social, economic and political disparity is producing cultural marginalisation in this contemporary world. This vicious cycle of inequality is true for underserved regions of both developing and developed countries. When most of the global population is living with or under US$5 per capita per day (Kochhar, 2015), it is crucial for intercultural researchers to study these populations at the margins, whose voices and issues are historically delegitimised/erased in the spaces of decision-making. These economically poor populations are also suffering from lack of access to education, health, technological resources; which consequently reproduce and reinforce the conditions of marginalization. Such poverty and other socio-economic disparities, along with growing global populations (e.g., estimated 8.5 billion by 2030 [United Nations, 2017]), anthropocentric activities and environmental deteriorations have led to several global missions including the United Nations’ sustainable development goals. In these long-term missions, global organizations are seeking to make the world a better place by 2030; scholars, researchers and practitioners from various academic disciplines (including STEM and social sciences) are contributing towards achieving these ambitious goals.

However, in many such development and social change projects, culture and communication scholarship still remains as a peripheral component, and the volume of culture and communication research on these emergent and macro issues is negligible, which makes our discipline less-visible, and less
engaged in academic and professional discursive spaces. In one of the few studies, Thornton and Cimadevilla (2010) showed the impact and relevance of participatory communication in the context of Latin American development, and scholars like Broome (2013) and Dutta (2018) argued that as researchers we need to be more applied and focus on key social issues, fostering academic-community partnership to foreground cultural realities through the voices of cultural participants (Chen, Lawless & Gonzalez, 2015; Ting-Toomey, 2007). Examples of such academic-community partnership in the context of participatory communication can be seen in several research initiatives such as (a) Niyamgiri movement (where indigenous populations organized for a bottom-up, local-centric development by foregrounding alternate epistemologies and resisting neoliberal agendas (Padel & Das, 2010); and (b) Sonagachi project (where sex-workers, by building alliances with academics and practitioners, made organized efforts towards fighting HIV/AIDS and ensuring and improving health and well-being at the margins (Jana et al., 2004). It is therefore urgent, and timely for culture and communication scholars to contribute to the aforementioned global missions towards making the world more habitable, tolerant, and just.

10.3.3 Hidden, dark and forbidden cultural practices
There are several aspects of life, particularly dark and forbidden ones that we usually prefer not to talk about or disclose in public to maintain social decorum. However, oftentimes these aspects constitute the foundation and development of our thought processes, through communication processes. For instance,
watching politically charged or superstitious conspiracy theory videos can influence those predisposed to particular political and social attitudes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Moreover, secret association with propagandist discourses (which are socially disapproved of) or participating in taboo rituals can result in fatal and/or socially-unhealthy consequences; e.g., following superstitious predictions, so-called religious practitioners and cults have committed dangerous and damaging actions (e.g., mass-suicide) (Mancinelli et al., 2002). In short, secret and forbidden aspects of culture and communication play important roles in shaping collective (un)consciousness. For another example, microaggressive behaviours and attitudes of men (sometime without consciously realising) towards women, or growing rape-culture in various parts of the globe can be traced to lack of sex/family education and/or over-reliance on mediated pornographic and misogynic contents (Makin & Morczek, 2016). Even as the outcome of all of these behaviour creates public sensations or shame, their roots can be traced back to our everyday actions, and thought foundations. Instead of condemning these outrageous or uncivil behaviours and their societal impacts, intercultural communication scholars need to engage with them in-depth to learn the unconscious (or subconscious) foundation of our different rationalities and actions.

10.3.4 Plurality and cultural ecology
Many underrepresented peoples across the globe, e.g., indigenous people, are constantly exploring and experimenting with situated (and limited) material and cultural resources to ensure their
survival. Such negotiations have given birth to alternate knowledge, science and technology; unfortunately, these knowledge resources receive little or no recognition in Western academia. For example, several age-old alternate medicinal approaches are often labelled as folk or pseudoscientific practices (Beyerstein, 2001). Moreover, strategic ignorance from the hegemon, and unequal fight of under-resourced people to preserve them, result in rapid disappearance of these alternate knowledge resources; many of them on the brink of extinction, lost forever, an irreversible/irreparable losses to humanity. Therefore, responsible intercultural research needs to pay attention to both documenting and preserving such alternate knowledge and knowledge-productions, potentially leading to better understanding and cultural interactions towards resolving conflicts, achieving equity, and improving intercultural exchanges and relationships. Dutta and Das (2015) demonstrated that intercultural factors are instrumental in co-creating culture-preservations solutions with underserved populations of the global south. Together with community members, they co-developed digital/information solutions by paying attention to (a) long-term participatory research engagements in overcoming linguistic/literacy barriers, (b) in-situ design development of visually–guided digital interface, and (c) embracing dialogic and critical reflexive praxis when designing for local audiences. The digital application addresses contextual/communicative barriers (e.g., literacy, linguistics and technological proficiency), so that people at the margins can communicate (i.e., retrieve, share and create cultural information) with other community members and the outside world.
Scholars further suggest that our inability to accept differences in communication styles and alternate repertories or knowledge systems, lead to barriers to health and development activities, and contribute to growing inequalities (Croucher et al., 2015; Viswanath & Ackerson, 2011). Therefore, intercultural research needs to actively reflect on overcoming ethnocentrism, naïve scientism, and apparent neutrality in describing ‘others’. Intercultural communication as a discipline deeply believes in plurality and rights of existence and functioning of every culture and cultural components such as languages, identities, values, and worldviews. However, dominant forces historically have delegitimized opposing and resistive voices and perspectives by promoting monocultural logics of modernism to maintain the status quo (Mendoza & Kinefuchi, 2016). It would be interculturally unfortunate if we are content with a mono-religious, mono-lingual, mono-ideological world; such approaches are antithetical to the essence of interculturality. Embracing social justice and equality perspectives of interculturality (Alexander et al., 2014), communicators need to foreground different/alternate cultural values and practices alive today, before their extinction; such an approach towards ensuring cultural ecology and diversity will prevent creation of ahistorical and uncritical world, and possible (re)establishment of a supremacist and colonial order.

10.3.5 Future approaches and methodologies
Intercultural communication as an academic discipline is uniquely situated, as it is dedicated to learn known, less known, and unknown cultural and communication practices. Conventionally,
we use academic methodological tools to understand, analyse and represent various cultures, which are mostly suited for US and other western contexts (Ting-Toomey, 2017). These theoretical and methodological frameworks and approaches yield a certain kind of academic output (which is standardized and conventionally appreciated in academic and professional domains). However, it can be argued that various cultural practices and behaviours can be better understood if we create or modify contextually appropriate methodological tools, specifically designed for studying less-studied cultures and societies, across the world; it would also enable us to better theorise and present our findings. For instance, Pink (2009) and Dutta (forthcoming) promote sensory (including visual) methodological approaches, useful for researching underserved cultures which face communicative barriers such as illiteracy, habitual shyness and muteness, and a lack of linguistic proficiency in mainstream languages. Specifically, Dutta (forthcoming) co-generated (with participants) culturally-appropriate hand-drawn images as prompts in order to more easily conduct qualitative interviews in indigenous communities in the global south. In this way, extant non-Western academic approaches (e.g., decolonising, delink, indigenous methodologies, performance and action-based work) should be consulted and studied, co-creating with local community members, to devise new theoretical and methodological frameworks. Moreover, a focus on decentring dominant knowledge production practices by foregrounding local/alternate worldview, paradigm, cultural conditioning can be instrumental in exploring and bringing forth
contextual narratives, imaginaries, identities, and cultural spaces (Schneider, 2010).

10.3.6 Emerging realities and cultural complexities

As a dynamic entity, culture is getting produced, reproduced, and transformed every moment, which gives birth to new cultural formations and dynamics. Instances from Arab spring and similar movements, remind us of human creativity and innovation in performing resistance and collective actions. Recent scholarship, e.g., on the dislocated people’s resistance in China (Yu-Shi, 2011), collective mediated voices of dissent (Coopman, 2011), and Dreamer’s articulations (Hartelius, 2016) represent new possibilities and explorations of collective movements. Another example could be the contemporary post-truth scenario, where authenticities of cultural expressions are experiencing severe threat as people are constantly creating untruth, seemingly truthful, strategically ambiguous and confusing messages for their vested interests; this scenario makes knowledge production process more complex than ever before (Harsin, 2015). Emerging cultural realities as these not only mark the beginning/possibilities of newer formations and dynamics (e.g., emergence of new global middle class through social media [Polson, 2011]), but also open up new possibilities of engaged research to understand such phenomena. For instance, intercultural research on the intersections of culture and posthuman (including Anthropocene and non-human aspects) (Stephens, 2014) and trans-human (including cyborg and technological interactions) paradigms potentially yield new understandings and theorizing of emerging human behaviours.
10.3.7 New dynamics of digital media

Shuter’s (2012) article on intercultural new media studies marked the beginning of systematic intercultural research on new-media and mediated behaviours (e.g. also Nakayama’s chapter, in this volume). So far, cultural communication research is primarily invested to study social mediated cultural behaviours, particularly those found in surface Web platforms (such as Google, Facebook and Twitter). Apart from conventional new media research, researchers could explore several new cultural dynamics such as culture of shaming, new moral panics (Ingraham & Reeves, 2016), and nontraditional media ownerships and disruptive platforms (Cunningham & Craig, 2016). However, more than 90% of the Web activities are either deep-web or dark-web in nature (Chertoff, 2017). Research on dark-web activities are particularly missing in cultural and communication research; this is important because dark-web interactions are specifically responsible for drug dealing, weapon selling, gambling, hacking, and child pornography among others (Bartlett, 2015). These platforms are also facilitators of alternate financial exchange and market possibilities such as introducing and promoting bitcoins (Kethineni, Cao, & Dodge, 2018).

In addition, when we use social media and online search engines, service providers generate contents based on predesigned algorithms, which selectively provide us partial access to information (as well as block certain contents) eventually leading to a limited variety of opinions and information; such anomalies and short-sightedness are often unintentional. Moreover, explorations in mediated communications and cultural behaviours,
particularly in virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence led (multi-sensory) environments, would potentially give birth to new understanding and possibilities to design culture- and communication-driven meaningful information-technology solutions for everyday human communication.

10.4 Conclusion
As described here, sociological theorising has contributed a great deal to intercultural communication scholarship, historically and contemporaneously. Our hope is that critical communication scholarship will continue to embrace goals of a more just, polyphonous, ‘multiculturalism without hierarchy’ (Asante, 2001) and a ‘new paradigm, beginning with the re-awakening of the human imagination to new/old long-forgotten possibilities’ (Mendoza, in Alexander et al., 2014, p.22).

References


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i Note: putting in three search words (intercultural, communication, and sociology) in one research data base yielded 311 citations.

ii We should note that European studies of intercultural communication followed a slightly different trajectory, more oriented toward language
issues—the role of language in intercultural encounters and the role of intercultural communication in language education (Corbett, 2009; Jackson, 2017; Kramsch, 2001), influenced by research in applied linguistics, linguistics, language education, disciplines like psychology and applied fields like business and management (e.g. Hofstede, 1991).

The premises of Blumer’s (1969) symbolic interaction is the center of human interaction is the negotiation of meaning (symbols) in densely connected primary groups; which determines individuals (and groups) larger schemes used to assess particular situations and then as a basis of action. It follows that races, nationalities and communities all develop their schemes of interpretations and particular ways of defining situations.

For example, goals 1 and 2 of SDGs seek to end hunger and poverty in all its forms everywhere by achieving food security and promoting sustainable agriculture. Likewise, goals 4 and 5, focus on inclusive education/lifelong learning opportunity and gender equality to bring about empowerment for all. Goal 16 focuses on promoting peace towards building an inclusive society for sustainable development, and providing justice to all.