

# **Toward a New Cartography of Intercultural Communication: Mapping Bias, Business, and Diversity**

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*Courses in intercultural communication often put non-Western students at a disadvantage. In developing a course with a majority of non-Western participants at The University of Waikato, we adapted critical pedagogy to address the Western biases in the texts and approaches of intercultural communication. We selected both mainstream and alternative readings that allowed students to connect the field's neo-colonial business present with its colonialist past, to question the ethics and efficacy of an often skewed territorialisation of knowledge, and to redress traditional distortions by introducing perspectives from a range of critical and post-colonial theorists. The readings were reinforced by student presentations of their own experiences crossing cultural borders. These experiences were then assessed in class, so that we didn't rely on the simulated experiences recorded in the conventional texts.*

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**A** NEW WESTERN COLONIALISM in business often distorts the teaching of intercultural communication and places non-Western students at a disadvantage. To counter these tendencies, we developed the intercultural communication course at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, described in this article. The course enrolled a majority of non-Western students: of the 13 participants, eight were "international" students, including five from Thailand and one each from China, Vietnam, and the Solomon Islands. The medium of instruction was English, the second or third language of the majority of the class.

To address the built-in bias of English and help accommodate the needs of these international students, we took critical peda-

gogy as a basic point of reference. Such pedagogy can be defined as "that which attends to practices of teaching/learning intended to interrupt particular historical situated systems of oppression" (Lather, 1992, p. 121). That approach matched our perception that the field of intercultural communication, especially the textbooks, was rooted in Western perspectives and had unacknowledged continuities with colonialist oppression. In foregrounding and challenging these continuities, we also took key bearings from a diverse range of what might be termed postcolonial theorists and writers. Although some of our chosen sources, such as Chakrabarty (1996), designate their work as part of subaltern studies rather than as postcolonialist, we nevertheless deploy the term broadly to encompass writers whose work resists colonialism in a variety of forms.

### **A Pattern of Distortions**

The cartographic metaphor underpinning this article, for example, derives from postcolonial historian Arno Peters's (1989) analysis of how maps, drawn up during European colonialism, create a warped geopolitical image of the world that positions the West in an artificially superior position. These colonial maps manipulate the shapes and sizes of continents and nations and distort the reality of their relative physical sizes so that North America looks larger than Africa and Scandinavia bigger than India. We argue that the cartography of intercultural communication projects similarly systematic distortions by wiping nations that are of marginal business interest to the West-dominated global market off the subject map.

Peters (1989) points to a supposedly neutral universality that concealed significant distortions, a perception we found to be particularly appropriate. Samovar, Porter, and Stefani's (1998) third edition of *Communication Between Cultures*, for example, opens by citing Matthew Arnold's famous definition of culture: "acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world, and thus with the history of the human spirit" (p. xi). The implicit claim to universality is large and ignores the statement's historical context as well as Arnold's role in an ethnically exploitative

British imperialism that was Eurocentric both commercially and culturally. Although that definition is immediately succeeded by some qualification through the Greek proverb that “Every tale can be told in a different way” (cited in Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998, p. xi), the tendency to democratic universalisation retains pride of place. It is confirmed by the book’s rationale, which identifies the growth of intercultural communication as emerging from two assumptions (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998, p. xi): firstly, “changes in technology, travel, economic and political systems, immigration patterns, and population density” (p. xi); and, secondly, that “people now know that the influence of culture affects communication in subtle and profound ways” (p. xii).

The neutrality of Samovar, Porter, and Stefani’s (1998) “changes” (p. xi) and the universality of their sensitised people conceal the systematic asymmetry of the exchanges between economically rich and economically poor parts of the world. That asymmetry is accurately depicted in the title of Athanasiou’s (1996) book: *Divided Planet*. That Samovar, Porter, and Stefani (1998) also ignore, or downplay, the historical conditions that have formed this inequality is clear in the absence of both “colonialism” and “imperialism” from their index. They are not alone. Neither word appears in the indices of such other texts as Jandt’s (1995) *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction*; Calloway-Thomas, Cooper, and Blake’s (1999) *Intercultural Communication: Roots and Routes*; and Neuliep’s (2000) *Intercultural Communication: A Contextual Approach*.

### **Course Textbook and Readings**

The book we chose as our text, *Foundations of Intercultural Communication* (Chen & Starosta, 1998) is, in many ways, representative of the field. It does provide appropriate content, depth, and range of coverage of intercultural communication issues. But, like most other books on the subject, it charts a world that clearly follows the geographical contours of the rich trading partners of Euro-American commerce and concentrates on the cultural norms of people from countries with which the West is doing, or has the

potential to do, business. As with most textbooks in the field, Chen and Starosta (1998) focus primarily on the dynamics of cultural interaction between Westerners, more specifically, the US and Americans, who feature on 30 pages, and people from the economic powerhouses of China (32 pages) and Japan (22 pages). There are far fewer references to less powerful economic nations such as India (3 pages) and Thailand (2 pages), and none whatsoever to the vast majority of other large population countries like Brazil and Indonesia. Economically impoverished parts of the world, such as countries in Africa, are rarely referenced in the intercultural communication sphere of influence. On this map, visible nation status tends to be granted to the sites of major, or what look likely to be major, trading posts of the West.

Unfortunately, despite efforts to include a diverse range of reading material, most of the business and management texts in the course packet looked at culture and communication through a restricted Western lens. As a conscious counterpoint to neo-colonial perspectives, our accompanying collections of course readings included chapters by such postcolonial scholars as Said (1978), Shohat and Stam (1994), and McClintock (1995); such feminists as hooks (1994); and such novelists as Amy Tan (1996) and Yasmin Gooneratne (1992).

In terms of theory, content, form, and method, these alternative readings draw from outside the traditional intercultural communication canon. They also contrast sharply with the views in the intercultural communication textbook and those of other diversity management theorists from business. Although, like the textbook, the business readings often present authors who are well meaning in their goal of furthering intercultural understanding, they are similarly rooted in Western modes of thinking and interests. They recognise difference but only in relation to "the assumed centrality of the dominant culture" (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 199).

This assumed centrality is recurrent in the literature on intercultural communication. More often than not, Western students (or businesspersons) are persuaded to learn more about non-Western cultures not only for their own increased business productivity

but also for their survival in an ever-changing world. As Hanna and Wilson (1998) put it:

The U.S. society and U.S. *businesses* are characterized by enormous diversity. Differences flow from both biology and culture. All this diversity nearly guarantees that at some time we will have a need to communicate with diverse people. [emphasis ours] (p. 92)

The “we” Hanna and Wilson refer to is the collective Western “we” who “watch Discovery Channel on television, . . . read the National Geographic, and . . . drive to different states and fly to different nations so we can touch and appreciate different cultures” (Hanna & Wilson, 1998, p. 84). The idea is to train the Western “we” to learn about the cultural values and business practices of the “they” in a bid to remain ahead in business. This logic aligns with current perceptions in Western management that “few businesses can afford to ignore the fact that in an economically hardpressed world, it is these new economies in Asia that provide the best hope for sustained business growth for both European and North American companies” (Cragg, 1993, p. 16). Significantly, there are few attitudinal differences between the “we” of businesspeople in the management literature and the “we” of intercultural communicators except that the former are explicitly for managers rather than claiming to be part of a disinterested project for disseminating knowledge and increasing international interaction.

For non-Western students of intercultural communication, the textual emphasis on the culture-business nexus from a Euro-American worldview is clearly misplaced. Ironically, as one Thai student put it, these texts go about teaching Asians how to deal with themselves. As for students from regions where the West has no major business interest, such as the many tiny islands of the Central and South Pacific, the texts mean much less for there is rarely even a cursory reference to issues of concern to them.

### **Unleashing the Power of Representation: Portraying Ethnic Specimens and Subaltern Cultures**

The preoccupation with training Western businesspeople to learn about prospective trading partners is reflected in Chen and

Starosta's (1998) range of case studies. These consistently build scenarios of interaction between an American and a person from another part of the world. Critical incidents of such simulated interaction typically revolve around essentialised notions of what Americans and Japanese, for instance, are supposed to stand for. In one example, Chen and Starosta (1998) cite the case of a meeting between representatives of an American and a Japanese corporation in which "the Japanese men all arrive dressed in identical blue suits" while the "Americans, each dressed in his own individual style, greet the other men with vigorous handshakes and a few slaps on the back" (p. 273). The example sets the tone for a line of binary divisions between homogenised Western individualism and an equally homogenised Asian collectivism.

Central to the binary division between the largely Western "we" and the largely non-Western "they" in intercultural communication are the cultural dimensions charted by the Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede (1980). These dimensions are routinely referred to in much of the work in the field, which follows Hofstede's (1980) thesis that some cultures promote individual values, such as personal achievement, while others emphasise collective values, such as a respect for conformity. Following Hofstede, Chen and Starosta (1998) classify the US, Australia, the U.K., Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Belgium, Italy, and Denmark, among others, as individualistic cultures and list Columbia, Venezuela, Pakistan, Peru, Taiwan, Thailand, Singapore, Chile, and Hong Kong as examples of collectivistic cultures. They do not spell it out, but these groupings are unmistakably divided on East-West lines. A similar division is made explicit in another prominent intercultural communication text:

The position of all of the countries in the Asia/Pacific region on the cultural dimensions of individualism/collectivism and power distance is very different from the position of most "Western" industrialized countries. All Asia/Pacific societies are collectivist and all Western societies are individualist. (Hoecklin, 1994, p. 71)

Ignoring the obvious contradictions in oversimplified binary categorisations, such intercultural communication, in fact, codifies a

gap between the “us” and the “them”. It is because of the “notion of intercultural training as a matter of helping ‘us’ with the problem of coping with and controlling ‘them’” that “the academic field of intercultural communication cannot escape its links to colonialism” (Putnis, cited in Irwin, 1996, p. 25). The colonialist desire to master the native is rekindled by intercultural communication’s neo-colonial pursuit of representing the Other. The way colonial discourses appropriate the manner in which the Other is represented has close parallels with the way intercultural communication describes the cultural values and norms of the non-Western world in essentialised terms. From a postcolonial perspective, as far as academic history is concerned, “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on” (Chakrabarty, 1996, p. 223). In this master narrative, other histories, such as India’s, find themselves in a “position of subalternity” (Chakrabarty, 1996, p. 223). In much the same way, because the power of representing these cultures belongs with those who compose the Western master narrative of cultural exchange, non-Western cultures find themselves in a position of subalternity in the field of intercultural communication.

One good example is a mini case highlighted in our chosen textbook. It depicts intercultural interaction between what is projected as a patient departmental secretary in a US university and a rude Indian student:

Mrs. Jane Simpson enjoyed her job as departmental secretary in a large, well-respected university in the United States. She enjoyed trying to be helpful to students as they worked their way through departmental and university regulations on their way toward their bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. One day, a student from India entered the departmental office and began demanding attention to his various problems with his visa, low course grades, and his thesis adviser. He never used words such as “please” and “thank you,” talked in a tone reminiscent of a superior talking to subordinates, and gave orders to Mrs. Simpson. Mrs. Simpson counted slowly to 10, but her anger did not subside. She went to see the department chairperson to see if someone else could work with this student in the future. (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 226)

In citing this case as a demonstration of “a potential problem caused by cultural differences” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 226),

the intercultural communication textbook uses its power of representation to define the differences that matter. The essentialised positioning of these differences as ethnic, without discussions on issues of class, status, and individual circumstance, simplistically attributes patience to Westerners and rudeness to Indians. This is not to claim that non-Western countries do not stereotype Westerners, which is clearly untrue, but to draw attention to power asymmetries with business consequences.

This power of representation is similar to the one wielded by Hollywood films to caricature non-Western cultures. Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, for instance, is an example of the way India is routinely caricatured by a deft juxtaposition of the grand and the grotesque. A much talked about scene in the film depicts a lavish dinner at the ornate palace of a stereotypical Maharaja. Quite incredibly, the menu includes, among other things, eyeball soup, cooked python, and monkey brains. At one level, this caricature simply entertains a Western audience. But more deeply, it adds to the power of the Western master narrative to represent other cultures. While authors of texts on intercultural communication might deny that they were indulging in the same gross "othering" as the makers of Hollywood films, they often do exercise similar colonising influences on a non-Western audience. As Stuart Hall (1996) explains:

It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that "knowledge," not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, but by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. (pp. 112-113)

Just as the West's economic/cultural power spreads Hollywood throughout the globe, a similar imposed will to power in intercultural communication texts shapes classes like the one we taught. As one Chinese student put it, the texts were providing her with essentialised notions of the cultural values she was *supposed* to stand for. Within such limitations, she said, it was often difficult for her to tell people in the West that she actually enjoyed watching Walt Disney's *Lion King*. Rey Chow (1996) narrates a similar story about how a Chinese candidate for a faculty position at the



University of Minnesota faced disparaging comments from a Western colleague because she “betrayed our expectation of what communist ‘ethnic specimens’ ought to be” (p. 122). This pigeonholing of ethnic communities is most evident in neo-colonial tourism enterprises in which Western consumers often demand that “Third World culture, people and places be as ‘original’ and ‘unspoiled’ as possible” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 197).

### **One-way Bridges:**

#### **Building Information Bases for Commercial Gain**

As the global axis of economic power shifts eastward, the West’s power of representing cultural values and traits will increasingly depend on its knowledge of non-Western cultural groups. Intercultural communication helps arm Western neo-colonial elites by building a knowledge base of the Other for them. This knowledge base is thickened by homogenising certain cultural traits such as those listed in our chosen textbook:

Only urbanized Indians shake hands. They have a relaxed sense of time. They tend not to date prior to marriage. They may interrupt the speaking of others. They maintain a strong respect for secular and religious teachers. Many practice dietary restrictions. They tend not to participate in classroom discussions. They like clearly defined tasks and exercise close supervision over their subordinates. (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 228)

Such descriptions undermine the enormous diversity of India and Indians. They gloss over the fact that the sub-continent is “a huge geographical expanse” that is home to “nearly a billion people” who speak “at least 20 major languages” (Bose & Jalal, 1998, p. 4). People from different parts of India have a huge range of cultural beliefs and practices that cannot be simplistically homogenised for the convenience of a Western audience. Such unidimensional and homogenised constructions simply serve to characterise India and Indians as a codified Other. This process of othering is strengthened by statements such as “many have dietary restrictions” (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 228), which are positioned to portray Indians as being different from the Western norm. Yet, ironically, many in the West, too, have dietary restric-

tions. Similarly, the description of Indians as people who like "clearly defined tasks" (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 228) denies them the attribute of creativity that the West likes to keep for itself. These dichotomous constructions of the Other are not restricted to Indians alone. The textbook has lists of "sample traits" of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and African Americans as well.

As an anticipatory action to ward off a charge of stereotyping, the textbook clarifies that these "observations should not be treated as absolutes" (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 227). The charge against the documentation of sample ethnic traits, however, is not so much one of stereotyping but of investing in the creation of a bank of so-called ethnic traits to subsidise the intercultural negotiating skills of Western businesspeople. It is clearly intended that Euro-American managers can subsequently make withdrawals from this bank to further their business goals. The concern with the self-interested goals of the developed (i.e., Western) world is implicit in Harris and Moran's (1991) typical statement:

With international trade and foreign investments on a steady increase, particularly with developing countries that have strong nationalistic tendencies, deep understanding of forces at work and skills to manage these forces will be keys to successful international management. (p. 67)

Such all-embracing international trade mechanisms as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) compose the new "narrative of shifting imperialist formations" (Spivak, 1999, p. 102). Unlike colonial nation states of the past, the new imperialist formations are dominant coalitions of neo-colonial business. Needing to engage with the Other for business profitability, these coalitions still want to maintain a distance between themselves and the Other to help retain control. The manner in which Western countries shape the rules of such organizations suggests, at best, a narrative twist to familiar colonising tales of unequal power relations.

In such a global context, despite its egalitarian goals, intercultural communication aids and abets neo-colonial business in

maintaining the gap between Western and non-Western cultures. By talking about difference in terms of traits, it ignores the social processes behind the construction of cultural differences. As the postcolonial scholar Avtar Brah (1996) explains: "'Difference' is constituted within the interstices of socio-political and economic relations. Just as social groups with differential access to wealth, power, and privilege are ranked in relation to one another, so are their cultures" (p. 19).

As a result, despite declared intentions to "usher in a more interdependent future that shapes our differences into a set of shared concerns and a common agenda" (Chen & Starosta, 1998, p. 4), the field of intercultural communication disowns its colonial legacy, neo-colonial present, and link to neo-colonial futures. In practice, the field maintains three major ideological components of colonialism and colonial racism:

... one, the gulf between the culture of the colonialist and the colonized;  
two, the exploitation of these differences for the benefit of the colonialist;  
three, the use of these supposed differences as standards of absolute fact.  
(Memmi, 1965, p. 71)

Intercultural communication texts construct difference in the sanitised terms of shared concerns and under spurious assumptions of a common agenda, and thus they ignore issues of injustice. They also demonstrate a strategic amnesia about the fact that "all knowledge is forged in histories that are played out in the field of social antagonisms" (p. 31). Such amnesia leads to their construction of a "harmonious ensemble of benign cultural spheres" (McLaren, cited in hooks, 1994, p. 31) in which everyone wears the same "have-a-nice-day smile" (hooks, 1994, p. 31). The consequences of the absence of a discussion on the reality of social antagonisms in intercultural communication texts were brought home by one of our Pacific Island students. During his presentation, this student questioned the notions of harmony in these texts in the light of his own experience of living and studying in New Zealand. He narrated the story of how passengers would shift away from him every time he took a seat on a public bus in

Hamilton and how pedestrians would give him a "strange look" every time he went out for a stroll. Intercultural texts did not prepare this student (or others like him) for an all too predictable Western racism clearly visible in media reports. In their simplistic celebration of differences innocent of history and prejudice, the texts ignored, marginalized, or negated his lived experience.

### **Defining Difference through Personal rather than Textual Experience**

Our course brought the dynamics of these social antagonisms out into the open. It interspersed mainstream readings on intercultural communication with less conventional ones—from novelists (e. g., Gooneratne, 1992; Tan, 1996), critical theorists (e. g., Hall, 1997; hooks, 1994; McClintock, 1995), and postcolonialists (e. g., Said, 1978; Shohat & Stam, 1994). All directly, if differently, address issues of injustice (particularly those marked by race, gender, and ethnicity). These alternative texts exhorted, encouraged, or modelled ways for students to challenge the adequacy of intercultural communication approaches and concepts. The readings were reinforced by student presentations of their own experiences crossing cultural borders. These experiences were then assessed in class, so that we didn't rely on the simulated experiences recorded in the conventional texts. The primary objective was to present a course less biased against non-Western students than is typical, at least as presented in the major intercultural communication texts.

Through critical pedagogy, we developed an experientially based, self-reflexive, and politically informed framework upon which to analyze the biases in most intercultural communication readings. We attempted, in hooks's (1994) terms, to "teach to transgress" (hooks, 1994). Through encouraging students to speak on race and discrimination issues, the course integrated lived student experiences with diverse critical perspectives, essential joint components for their study of intercultural communication.

Without such integration, the ever-expanding literature on intercultural communication can still make contributions to promoting cross-cultural understanding. However, it will do so at the cost of

ignoring historical and contemporary imbalances of power. It will also continue to undergird a systematic asymmetry between imperialised formations, represented by largely Western neo-colonial business enterprises at the centre, and numerically stronger, but socio-economically weaker, cultural and ethnic groups on the margins. We conclude that attempts to acknowledge, and to adjust, this balance of power along the lines suggested would also assist non-Western students to better navigate the field's existing charts of knowledge.

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