People in Glass Houses:
Cultural Biases
in Intercultural Communication Competence Research

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Fall 2001 / Spring 2002

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Like so many other research endeavors in the field of intercultural communication, this paper could have started with a discussion of an increasingly globalized economy, growing intercultural exchange, and the importance of studying intercultural communication. It could have proceeded to describe intercultural communication competence research as the most promising and popular venue of studying the field, and it could finish with an expression of hope that the research described in the paper will make a difference in making intercultural communication less problematic and challenging.

The purpose of this paper, however, is to offer a critical evaluation of extant research in the field of intercultural communication competence (ICC). The issue of ICC is much too complicated and controversial to be described in a straightforward way presented above. All too often, the complex nature of the phenomenon is dismissed by researchers who focus more on the advantages of the ICC approach and the hazardous consequences of incompetence (see, for example, Spitzberg (1994)).

Numerous deficiencies of ICC research have been noted by other scholars. These include lack of consistent terminology (Hammer, 1989), disagreement over major definitions (Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993), lack of adequate theoretical framework (Martin, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1993), and inadequacy and inaccuracy of empirical testing (Lustig & Spitzberg, 1993). However, no matter how grave these deficiencies may seem, same claims can be made about almost any other branch of human communication studies, especially during the early stages of a discipline’s development. The history of intercultural communication competence research spans some 40 or 50 years (Ruben, Askling, & Kealey, 1977; Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993), so there is a promise that many of the disagreements and inadequacies will be gone before long. Reviewers of the field have noted an improvement on many of those dimensions already (Hammer, 1989; Ruben, 1989; Kim, 1991; Wiseman, 2002), which shows an increased awareness of these problems in the scholarly community.

There remains, however, another grave concern. It is a problem of cultural biases that researchers bring with them. For any scholar, the problem of bias may be much harder to identify
than, for example, some inadequacy or lack of rigor in a research design. While improving research designs requires the knowledge of statistical procedures, hunting down cultural biases would require of the researcher to succeed in a very difficult task of evaluating his or her own work from a distance. If it may prove difficult to stand back and identify the biases, it may be even harder to eliminate or control them. However, cultural prejudices may be as harmful to the results of any study as a flawed experimental design or a miscalculated correlation.

Awareness of cultural biases is especially important in the field of intercultural communication. The goal of improving intercultural interactions is poorly served by fueling misunderstanding with ethnocentric assumptions and overgeneralizations. This holds true for intercultural communication in general and to the studies of competence in this context in particular. If competence is indeed a measure of communication quality (Spitzberg, 1989), than our assumptions about competence predetermine our judgments of ‘high’ and ‘low’ quality communication. It is naive to believe that our decisions about choosing definitions and viewpoints are dictated by objective factors only. It is naive to deny the dynamics of power and influence that our choices inevitably bring into being. These are even more obvious in the field of competence research. As Collier (1998) aptly puts it,

> Competence... is a construct that is based on implicit privilege... competence and acceptance from whom? Who decides the criteria? Who doesn’t? Competent or acceptable on the basis of what historical and social context? To assume that ontologically interlocutors negotiate mutual rules of appropriate conduct is to deny the power of ideology, historical structures, and limitations in the field of choices (p.142).

Our definitions of competence are ways of exerting influence over choices of appropriateness and inappropriateness. They are a measure of adequate or inadequate in human communication, and they can be used to discriminate as much as they can be used to instruct.

In sum, cultural biases represent a particularly serious threat to the validity of studies on intercultural communication competence (ICC). Even though there are other comparatively as important deficiencies in ICC research, this paper focuses on the pitfalls of cultural prejudices and assumptions that researchers may unknowingly bring with them. It is precisely the subtle
nature of biases that makes them so dangerous and pervasive. Also, various reviewers (Hammer, 1989; Ruben, 1989; Wiseman, 2002) have already undertaken the task of identifying concerns about ICC research other than the cultural limitations. Therefore the new review found in this paper will help to address issues that other reviewers didn’t choose to focus on:

1) offer an alternative perspective on the development and the current state of ICC studies
2) analyze the influence of cultural bias on ICC research
3) identify potential threats to validity that such biases bring
4) suggest ways of minimizing biases through the use of methodology that is relatively free from bias.

The four tasks outlined above may seem to entail a tremendous amount of work given the number of published studies on ICC. That is why the paper focuses particularly on the current dominant paradigm of ICC research (Spitzberg, 1989; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Milhouse, 1993) - the view of competence as impression based on an observer’s rating of one’s behavior (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). This serves the purpose of defining the topic of the current review more precisely and allows to dedicate more attention to the most popular approach that is currently the basis of the only developed assessment program (Ruben, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Koester & Olebe, 1988; Olebe & Koester, 1989). It is also a skill-based approach which means its use in education would be mostly prescriptive. This is alarming given that behavioral observation is known to be the most problematic and the least generalizable of existing approaches (Ruben, 1989). Since this approach is the one that is most likely to be used in education and at the same time one most vulnerable to biases, it seems wise to spend more time analyzing the loci where such biases may enter the play and what impact they may have on the findings.

In sum, the main goal of this review is to evaluate cultural biases in ICC research, especially among the studies that use the behavioral approach and view competence as an impression. The main premise of the review is there in its title: just like people in glass houses,
of all people, should be careful about throwing stones, intercultural communication scholars, of all scholars, should be careful about their cultural biases.

It is imperative to review the development of communication research before attempting to analyze or evaluate it. Competence research has borrowed extensively from various disciplines (Martin, 1993) since scholars in the field hailed from different research traditions and schools of thought.

Different Types of Competence: Linguistic, Academic and Communicative

Chomsky (1965) is credited with coining the term 'linguistic competence'. The term is mentioned several times throughout his very influential book, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965). Even though no clear definition is provided by Chomsky, it can be inferred from Chomsky's work that cognitive ability is central to his understanding of competence. As Wiemann and Backlund (1980) note, "for Chomsky... the goal of competence theory is not the explanation of events and processes, but rather the discovery of cognitive structures and mental representations that underlie the events" (p.187).

The next landmark in the history of competence research is the work of Dell Hymes (1971, 1972), who introduced the concept of communicative competence elaborating on Chomsky's work. Diaz-Rico & Weed (1995) note that with the introduction of this concept the teaching of language has taken a new more pragmatic direction. Faerch et al. (1984) acknowledge the significance of the new approach when they note that "communicative competence has tended to be something of a vogue term in language teaching in recent years, with all the hazards that passions evolve". (p.167).

Hymes' (1971) definition of competence is as follows:

the most general term for the speaking and hearing capabilities of a person. Competence is understood to be dependent on two things: (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use
In other words, Hymes's definition includes both cognitive and behavioral facets.

The work of Hymes was further developed by Canale (1983) and Canale & Swain (1980). Canale (1983) singled out four components of communicative competence: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, strategic competence, and fluency and discussed their relevance in language teaching.

Another dimension of competence research of some relevance to the present investigation is academic competence, introduced by an ethnographer Saville-Troike (1984, 1989). She argued that successful performance in the academe requires a specific set of competencies that do not necessarily coincide with the ability to use spoken language fluently.

Finally, another line of research related to the present study is Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, which states that the rule of effective communication “make your conversational contribution, such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (p.45). This can be thought of as an indirect descriptive definition of competence.

In sum, the fact that different notions of competence gain acceptance in the last two decades reflects a shift towards a more pragmatic, practical approach in language teaching, a shift from teaching rules to teaching skills (Faerch at al., p.167). It is part of the same pragmatic orientation that fueled research on competence in the field of communication. It is also noteworthy that 'communicative competence' introduced by Hymes is a different notion from 'communication competence' discussed by communication researchers. There is a lot of inconsistency in term usage in this field of research and every effort should be made to keep different concepts separate.

Communication Competence as Motivation, Skill, Knowledge, Performance, or Impression
The previous section shows that researchers in the fields other than communication have laid the foundation for the competence study, but that they did not reach consensus as to what competence meant and how it should be defined and used. It is using this foundation that communication scholars attempted to develop conceptualizations of competence in different contexts, such as interpersonal (Spitzberg, 1983; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980; McCroskey, 1982), small group (Beebe et al. 1998a; Beebe et al., 1998b), and intercultural (Ruben, 1976; Ting-Toomey, 1993; Cupach and Imahori, 1993; Gudykunst, 1993).

One thread that runs through most definitions of CC is the tricotomy borrowed from psychology: the psychomotor, affective, and cognitive domains. These dimensions represent important facets of CC. One without the other two may not be a sign of competence. It is possible to be able to deliver a good performance, yet have no idea why it worked (knowledge) and no aspirations for the performance to be successful (affect). Most definitions of CC stress at least one dimension out of the three; Spitzberg (1983) argues that they are all essential and inseparable and that the term “communication competence” “provides a reasonable and useful umbrella under which to shelter them” (p.327).

Wiemann and Backlund (1980) also propose a broad definition of CC, focusing on two dimensions: the cognitive and behavioral (in this paper the term behavior in relation to CC is synonymous to performance and refers to the psychomotor domain of the classification discussed above). They evaluate the two dimensions and conclude that a strong case may be made for both (p. 188). However, the purely cognitive approach focuses on how people "should and could behave" (p.189), but has no concern for the consequences of such actions. The purely behavioral approach, on the other hand, is focused on the real world but offers little understanding for the mechanisms that produce the behavior. They therefore conclude that a more useful approach would be a combination rather than a juxtaposition of the two domains.

Summarizing the evolution of the concept of CC, McCroskey (1982) noted that research in this area tended to gravitate towards the cognitive approach in the 1960s under the influence of Chomsky's work, but in the 1970s the focus shifted to more "empirical and behavioral
orientation” (p.2), reflecting the new emphasis on interpersonal communication rather than public speaking. McCroskey’s (1982) own definition of CC is centered around knowledge. He chooses to eschew a more narrow definition of the term. He also notes that most current definitions are centered around behavior, not knowledge.

If CC is defined in terms of knowledge, this means that the goal of communication education is narrowed to the cognitive domain only. This is the pragmatic implication of McCroskey’s paradigm. The strength of this approach is the fact that the cognitive domain, unlike the other two, is easily measured by testing. It is therefore easy to assess the effectiveness of communication education. McCroskey’s approach has a clear pragmatic value for educational assessment. He acknowledges that questions of usefulness rather than correctness are guiding his definitional choices in approaching the concept of CC. On the other hand, the weakness of this approach, articulated by McCroskey (1982), is the following: competent communicators do not always achieve their goals. Thus if effectiveness is a measure of overall competence, McCroskey’s model has limited practicality.

One argument in favor of such a narrow definition comes from McCroskey’s recent research on communibiology (McCroskey & Beatty, 2000). If our affective predispositions are largely inherited, educators cannot hope to make much difference in making one’s affect towards communication more positive. Following this argument, the affective domain as part of CC becomes “excessive baggage”. McCroskey’s model is driven by questions of practicality and utility and complex definitions such as the “umbrella term” treatment proposed by Spitzberg are out of place.

There are other important facets to the issue of CC other than cognitive, affective, and performance domains. The issue of contextuality is one of them.

Spitzberg (1983) claims that “competence is contextual” (p.324). What is appropriate in one context, is inappropriate (and therefore incompetent) in another. The issues of appropriateness and effectiveness are related to contextuality. In each situation, the message can achieve or fail to achieve the desired goal (effectiveness) and meet or fail to meet the moral
standards of ethical communication (appropriateness). (Spitzberg, 1994, p.31). On the face of it, the introduction of concept of contextuality complicates the issue. How can this new concept be combined with the three dimensions of motivation, knowledge, and skill? Apparently, contextuality brings a new perspective that can be used in conjunction with the dimensional approach.

In an excellent summary of research on interpersonal CC, Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) elaborate on the notions of contextuality, appropriateness, and effectiveness. They note that CC is perceived appropriateness and effectiveness (p.100), an interpersonal impression (p.115), an interpersonal inference rather than a set of skills and behaviors (p.153), but that "this inference is made more probable by the individual attributes of motivation, knowledge, and skill in interaction" (p. 154).

Probably the most severe limitation of models of CC that focus on the three dimensions only is that the locus of competence is the individual communicating. Such a model can't account for the fact that to be successful, one needs different skills, various levels of motivation, and different kinds of knowledge in a given situation. The notion of contextuality solves this problem; the notions of appropriateness and effectiveness place the locus of competence in the observer, not the communicator.

Currently the view of CC as impression of appropriateness and effectiveness is perhaps the most popular approaches to the study of CC among communication scholars. It has been used by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) to define interpersonal CC. Beebe et al. (1998b) used it as the basis for developing an instrument for assessing small group communication (Beebe et al., 1998a). They define CC as "an impression of the appropriateness and effectiveness of an individual's behavior in a situation" (p.3). The same approach is used by Ruben (1976) in his discussion of CC in intercultural contexts.

Intercultural Communication Competence
The early studies of cross-cultural effectiveness appeared in the United States after the World War II, reflecting a general trend of increased international interaction and cooperation (Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993). From the very beginning, these studies were driven almost exclusively by pragmatism, the need to predict sojourner successes and failures. At first, the degree of adaptation was believed to be an indicator of one’s effectiveness. However, the focus gradually shifted from successful adaptation to effectiveness and appropriateness (Cupach & Imahori, 1993) about the same time that researchers gave up the term “cross-cultural effectiveness” in favor of a new buzz word, “intercultural communication competence”. This shift reflects a new understanding of effectiveness/competence: while earlier studies had a positive pragmatic orientation and were concerned with results (such as adaptation), the new vision of competence rested on ethical assumptions imported from interpersonal communication research. Most recent studies are based on an assumption, usually not stated explicitly, that “the same sorts of interpersonal and social communication skills which are generally considered to be important to effectiveness of competence within Western cultures are central to cross-cultural functioning as well” (Ruben & Kealey, 1979, p.16).

By late 1980s, international communication scholars had almost completely abandoned the terms used earlier (such as cross-cultural effectiveness, cross-cultural success, cross-cultural adaptation, and cross-cultural adjustment (see review in Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993) in favor of the term ‘intercultural communication competence’. This is best shown by the two efforts, the special issue of *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* published in 1989 and the book on ICC appearing around that time (Wiseman & Koester, 1993). In the opening chapter, Koester, Wiseman and Sanders (1993) describe the term “intercultural communication competence” as an appropriate term to refer to the subject of research in the field. They believe that the growing consensus among scholars is the most compelling reason for such usage. They also strike upon an interesting note: they argue that intercultural scholars did not debate the relative benefits of accepting ‘effectiveness’, ‘success’, or ‘adjustment’ as an alternative to
‘competence’. They have accepted the latter following the trend set by the interpersonal researchers.

The theme of borrowing from interpersonal research is interesting in that it seems that ICC scholars have not stopped with simply transposing the terminology. As is evident from Ruben and Kealey view (1979) quoted above they have also adopted some of the same assumptions about the nature of communication competence. In other words, the frameworks developed by interpersonal scholars were used to approach the study of intercultural communication.

The publication of the volume edited by Wiseman and Koester (1993) securely placed the term “intercultural communication competence” into the position of a preferred nomenclature for the subject of study in the field. However, this by no means marked the end of a dispute over the nature of the phenomenon. The argument became even more tangled because the term had a direct relationship to communication competence in general. The new term created a field that claimed a vast territory and subsumed the earlier studies of effectiveness that had a purely practical orientation and the newer studies that borrowed definitions and methodology from interpersonal scholars. As a result, despite the fact that “intercultural communication competence” became accepted by most, different scholars still invested it with different and sometimes conflicting meanings, hindering integration in the field and making generalizations impossible.

An analysis of different definitions of ICC reveals the vast differences in conceptualizations among various scholars. Ruben (1976) offers a definition that comes from the tradition of interpersonal research. His definition echoes the ones offered by Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) and by Beebe et al. (1998a). The substance of his definition is the same; only the wording and the use of terms is different. In the following definition, it is easy to note descriptive definitions of what years later will be defined as appropriateness and effectiveness:

Communicative competence is the ability to function in a manner that is perceived (= impression) to be relatively consistent with the needs, capacities, goals, and expectations of the individual in one's environment (=appropriateness) while satisfying one's own

Following the same approach, Min-Sun Kim (1993) defines competence as “general impression of communication quality” (p.133). Other scholars view communication competence in intercultural encounters differently. For example, Gudykunst (1993) centers his view around the idea of minimizing misunderstanding. Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) argue that competence is the quality with which interaction is performed. Some scholars focus on identity, rather than quality of interaction, when defining ICC. Ting-Toomey (1993) defines ICC as an effective negotiation process in a new communication episode. When confronted by a novel situation, we succeed or fail to depending on the security of our self-identification. A similar viewed is expressed by Cupach and Imahori (1993) who define ICC as “the ability of an individual to successfully negotiate mutually acceptable identities in interaction” (p.118).

However, a closer look at the work of Ting-Toomey (1993) shows that she uses the term ICC to advance her own understanding of intercultural communication through the study of communication resourcefulness, that is defined “the knowledge and the ability to apply cognitive, affective, and behavioral resources appropriately, effectively, and creatively in diverse interactive situations” (p.74). In this respect, Ting-Toomey’s approach is similar to Young Kim’s (1987, 1988, 1991, 2001). Both scholars stress the essential quality of flexibility and creativity as a major factor in the attainment of ICC. Kim (1991) describes adaptability as metacompetence that lies at the heart of ICC. In describing the adaptation process, she uses the term “host communication competence” rather than ICC to talk about the culture-specific communication competencies that a stranger needs to acquire in order to be able to succeed in a foreign environment.

In sum, different scholars use different definitions of ICC and focus on specific aspects of the concept depending on their definitional choices. Given the breadth of phenomena that ICC seems to include, it seems reasonable to use the term as a description of the field, rather than as a construct that can be observed, measured, and clearly separated from others. Within ICC,
researchers can develop more precise constructs, such as adaptability or communication resourcefulness, that yield themselves more readily to observation and measurement. Because of a relative ease in observing and measuring such phenomena, researchers can use empirical methods to test the validity of their assumptions.

One could argue against abandoning attempts to measure and observe ICC per se by pointing us to the efforts of Brent Ruben and his followers (Ruben, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Koester and Olebe, 1988; Olebe & Koester, 1989). Working from a definition of competence as an impression based on the observation of behaviors, Ruben has developed an instrument for the assessment of ICC, that was further elaborated and tested by Koester and Olebe (1988). Olebe and Koester (1989) even claim to have established the cross-cultural validity of the instrument. However, there is a number of grave concerns related to this assessment program. The most significant concern was voiced by Ruben himself:

While one can argue that the importance of communication behaviors such as empathy, respect, non-judgementalness, etc., transcends cultural boundaries, the way these are expressed and interpreted may vary from one culture to another (Ruben, 1976, p.344).

In other words, if we base our conceptualizations of ICC on observation of behavior, there is the danger of obtaining biased results based on the particular cultural expectations of the observer.

Moreover, the claim that communication behaviors enumerated by Ruben are universally applicable across cultures lacks adequate empirical support. Olebe and Koester’s (1989) “cross-cultural testing” is the only known attempt to strengthen the claim. Given the magnitude of it, one would expect more data in its support before it can be accepted. Olebe and Koester’s (1989) study has many deficiencies that further weaken its results: the sample consisted of American and foreign students in an American university, which means that the “intercultural” participants had probably stayed in the U.S. for a period of time long enough to adjust to the American culture and obtain some of the communication skills valued by Americans. Furthermore, the instrument was administered in English. The whole process was conceived, planned, and
executed by two North American scholars. Researchers do not provide any information about the nationality of the participants. What cultures were represented? Was the representation significant to make such broad generalizations as “cross-cultural equivalence” of the instrument? Finally, the consistent results obtained by Olebe and Koester (1989) may simply imply that foreigners that come to study in the U. S. answer similarly not because the instrument is universally applicable, but because they shared the same values even before they came to the country and the adjustment made them even more homogeneous.

In other words, the efforts of Ruben and his followers are impressive in that they represent one of the most advanced and coherent program of research on ICC, but they still fail to obtain meaningful results unmarred by limitations and biases. A number of key questions still remains unanswered; a number of flaws unaccounted for; and many cultural limitations are still ignored. The following section will examine these issues in more detail.

Unanswered Questions in ICC Research

Definitions of ICC. Among many concerns about ICC, one stands out. The cornerstone of any field is the definition of the studied object. Richard Weaver (1990) justly claimed that definitions deal with the essential, universal, and unchanging qualities of a phenomenon, and are the most reliable way of knowing it. In other words, our ability to define the term reflects our depth of understanding of it. If one is unable to produce a coherent definition, then one’s knowledge of the phenomenon is inadequate. So far, intercultural scholars have not succeeded in defining their subject or in agreeing on any one definition of it (Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993). Current definitions cover a broad range of phenomena, but there is little overlap between conceptualizations offered by different scholars. Therefore, there is a need for unified definition that would describe the whole field, as well as the particular domains or sub-fields, such as adaptability or communication resourcefulness.
Definitions of culture and communication. In most definitions of ICC, there are no explicit statements about the author’s perceptions of culture and communication (Collier, 1989). What is the domain of “intercultural communication”? This question can be answered only if culture and communication are defined. Without knowing the limits of intercultural communication, how can we talk about competence in this context? Is it about people from different countries, or people from different language backgrounds, or people brought up in different cultural environment, or all of the above?

Primacy of culture. What is the relation of ICC to communication competence in other contexts? Should intercultural communication be viewed as a subset of interpersonal communication? Or is it that intracultural communication is a subset of intercultural? The issue of primacy of culture is ignored in most definitions of ICC (Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders, 1993). Gudykunst and Kim (1984) offer a valuable perspective on the relationship between the interpersonal and the intercultural. They assume that communication in both situations shares the same dynamics. However, in intercultural situations the most salient difference between interactants is cultural, while in intracultural encounters personal differences are most salient (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). This difference is usually unaccounted for by researchers who import interpersonal communication theories into the intercultural domain who assume that assumptions about the two contexts are interchangeable (Ruben & Kealey, 1979). If intercultural communication is viewed primarily as interpersonal communication between people from different cultures, then there is a need to recognize the difference between situations when a stranger is entering a culture and between representatives of a culture responding to a stranger, or two strangers meeting on some middle ground (like two foreigners on a plane or at an international conference). In each case, the need to adapt would be different: it would be highest for a stranger in a new culture, medium for two foreigners, and lowest for the “locals” interacting with a stranger.

Intercultural communication competence vs. host communication competence. Kim (1987) defines host communication competence as an “immigrant’s overall capability to decode
and encode messages effectively in interacting with host environment” (p. 195). She notes that the acquisition of host communication competence plays a key part in the adaptation process and the two parallel each other. Once competence is acquired, the adaptation process is accomplished. The notion of host communication competence is a worthy addition to the nomenclature of intercultural communication. In cases that focus on the process of a stranger’s adaptation in a new culture, it offers more clarity than the all-embracing concept of ICC, since it seems to be easier to isolate the specific competencies in a particular culture rather than to struggle with the universal competencies that are shared across cultures.

Culture-specific vs. culture-general. Kim’s notion of host communication competence is helpful in examining culture-specific notions of competence. Most scholars, however, strive for a culture-general understanding of ICC (Lustig & Koester, 1993). The culture-general approach complicates the matter significantly and requires a further elaboration of many questions. What qualities would a competent communicator possess? If we manage to identify some universal qualities that work in all cultures, would that mean that a competent person would be successful in any culture? Or does that mean that such a person would have a better chance of adapting to a new situation than an incompetent person? If we admit that adaptation is central to competence, wouldn’t it be logical to use Kim’s (1991) notion of adaptability rather than a more general (and hence vague and elusive) notion of ICC?

Competence as behavior. The behavioral approach is the most common one for conceptualizing ICC (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). The behavioral approach presupposes that there is a set of identifiable behaviors that constitute competence. So far, “the sheer number and variety of intracultural and intercultural social skills and abilities have resulted in a lack of congruence concerning the most salient behaviors” (Martin & Hammer, 1989, p. 305). The real complexity of the task may be much greater than the available data suggest. The evidence accumulated so far is based on a limited research base. Most of published studies on ICC that used behavioral approaches were conducted in English; almost all used U. S. American subjects as one of the cultural groups studied. When ICC research ventured outside the U.S. and the
domain of the so-called “Western culture”, it usually touched the most easily accessible cultures such as the Japanese. We lack empirical evidence about the nature of competence and behaviors that constitute it in contexts such as the interaction between the Chinese and English, or Italians and Spaniards. In other words, most of our data deals with the United States and its economic and academic partners, the “Western world”. We need more research on ICC in other cultures before we can establish the validity of the behavioral approach. As more and more cultures are studied, the number of behaviors that are perceived as competent will continue to grow, making the task of identifying universal behaviors more and more difficult, if not impossible.

The focus on the specific features of interaction between U. S. Americans and representatives of other nations has beyond any doubt influenced the direction of ICC research. Obviously if the study of ICC began with studies of interaction of other nations, such as for example, Germans and English, it would have developed in a significantly different way to reflect the unique qualities of those nations.

Finally, it seems that our adherence to terms like “Western” creates a false sense that our findings so far are generalizable to all the cultures supposedly belonging to the “Western world”. Many other terms, even the seemingly harmless “North American” (not to mention the currently popular one-size-fits-all term “Euro-American”) are potentially misleading. Is that based on geography or cultural identity? Does that include subcultures in the U. S. American culture, such as the unique traditions of the Black and Hispanic communities? If yes, then why do we assume that our findings will apply there as well? Unfortunately, the reality is that most current definitions of “competence” “privilege the communicative style of middle class white Americans” (Moon, 1996, p.75) and that ICC research is “limited primarily to the Euro-American community, and largely middle class, college educated strata” (Martin, 1993, p.18). If our goal is to develop a universally acceptable definition an understanding of ICC, than we need to focus more on other cultures and subcultures.

Competence as impression. Many current approaches to ICC (Ruben, 1976; Ruben & Kealey, 1979; Koester and Olebe, 1988; Olebe & Koester, 1989) view competence in
intercultural communication as an impression. In other words, competence resides in the observer, the receiver rather than the sender. Unfortunately, the cultural and individual biases create many obstacles in obtaining accurate judgments using this approach (Ruben, 1989). This is probably the strongest argument against the use of observation techniques for the assessment of competence in any context; however, the cultural differences make its use even more problematic in intercultural contexts. Also, the process of evaluation inevitably brings discrimination, and the power relations come into play (Collier, 1998). The impression-based approach to competence raises other ethical concerns, especially in the instructional context. If our goal is to teach competence and competence is defined as an impression, than the focus of education is on learning to make the right impressions to the detriment of the humanistic ideal of cultivating sound moral standards that reside within the individual.

*Appropriateness and effectiveness as the core of ICC.* Some scholars have questioned the centrality of appropriateness and effectiveness to the issue of ICC (Martin, 1993; Carbaugh, 1993; DeTurk, 2001). They believe that such an interpretation of competence is based on the values of the “Western” researchers that may fail to accommodate the perceptions of competence in other cultures. Reaching goals and maintaining individual control is central to such an understanding of ICC (Parks, 1985; Wiemann & Kelly, 1981); but it may not be applicable to countries where maintaining relational harmony prevails over individual achievement (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). The preoccupation with individual achievement does not only permeate our definitions of competence, it leaks into the interpretation of results. For example, Kealey (1989) uses labels “winners” and “losers” to describe the results of the adaptation process of his respondents. It is alarming to see such a narrow ethnocentric approach in scholarly writing, let alone in a published study by a renowned researcher in intercultural communication.

Even if appropriateness and effectiveness are central to ICC, their perceptions may shift from culture to culture. As Carbaugh (1993) notes, there is more to competence than meets the eye:
...what constitutes effectiveness and appropriateness is a complex matter, including not only the doing of proper things properly but also, as any thief knows, the doing of improper things properly, and further, as any Burundi - among others - knows, there are times and occasions when one ought to exhibit incompetence to artfully communicate to others the competence of being incompetent (Carbaugh, 1993, p.173).

In other words, cultural differences make the notions of appropriateness and effectiveness and the notion of competence itself too ambiguous, and raise questions about the possibility of working out a universal definition of these terms.

Carbaugh (1993) mentioning of thieves also brings up the often ignored question of ethics and unethical communication. In most cases, ICC research is based on the “assumption that open communication and mutual understanding are universally valued”(DeTurk, 2001, p.377). However, this may not hold true for the communicative style of social groups other than “middle class white Americans” (Moon, 1996, p.75). For these other groups, open communication may be troublesome.

Need for the study of competence. At a deeper level, there are also concerns about the need for and purpose of ICC research. Collier (1989) justly notes that many researchers fail to provide a coherent rationale that explains their motives for doing the research. She calls for “more deliberate answers to the “So what?” question” (Collier, 1989, p.289).

This is specifically important since the very notion of competence may not be helpful in some cultures. In the United States, it is definitely a matter of interest to both scholars and practitioners (Spitzberg, 1989; Martin & Hammer, 1989). However, Lustig and Spitzberg (1993) note that there are “conceivable instances in which the evaluation of competence may be relatively insignificant within a culture” (p.166). Some cultures or contexts may have little variance in terms of competence since the interactional requirements are low. According to Lustig and Spitzberg (1993), the study of competence in cultures like that will reveal few insights.
In other words, there is a need for more research into the relevance of competence studies in a given culture (Lustig & Spitzberg, 1993) as well as a need for a better developed rationale for conducting ICC research (Collier, 1989).

*Need to recognize the limitations of the findings.* At the deepest level, there are epistemological concerns about ICC research. Most limitations discussed above are unique to the field of intercultural communication; this last concern in particular is shared by other fields in the social sciences. The nature of this concern is best described by Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1987):

Modern scholars usually deny their rhetoric. Wearing masks of scientific methodology first donned in the seventeenth century, they have forgotten about the rhetorical faces underneath... many people grow weary of claims that experimental technique, documentary interpretation, or regression analysis can avoid “subjectivity” (p.3).

Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey (1987) argue that the dichotomy between truth and opinion is largely artificial and that there is a “need to recognize that rhetoric is reasonable and reason is rhetorical” (p. 33). (Nelson & Megill, 1986). In other words, the social scientists are preoccupied with exploring the nature of objective reality, and they fail to acknowledge that their adherence to rigorous research methods or APA style notation does not guarantee the objectivity of results (Bazerman, 1996). Following Nietzsche and Heidegger, Nelson & Megill (1986) believe that facts cannot speak for themselves. Even if the researcher succeeds in obtaining accurate information about reality, the task of interpreting the results rests with him or her. Without the interpretation, the findings are meaningless. It is during the process of interpretation that meaning is assigned to the observed phenomena and that individual beliefs, cultural predispositions, biases, and power dynamics come into play.

In the case of ICC research, it is critical to recognize the rhetorical nature of much scholarship in the field. Terminological and definitional disputes, as well as reviews of extant research, are especially hard to accept as anything but arguments. Theoretical pieces, by their nature, also deal with establishing points of reference in our structuring of reality and as such, are as much rhetorical arguments as they are “objective scholarly writing”. The aim of the scholar,
on the one hand, is to advance knowledge; on the other hand, this progress is achieved by trying to persuade other scholars to accept the claims that are being made.

That is why one can argue that rhetoric is central to the study of communication, and to the study of ICC in particular. There is a tendency to separate the “rhetorical” and the “scientific”, but as Nelson and Megill (1986) argue, the two are inseparable: to compartmentalize truth and opinion, object and subject, substance and form, and the like, rejects the mediation of rhetoric while depending on it. (p.22).

In sum, there is a need to recognize the limitations of our ability to obtain objective knowledge about reality. This is particularly true of the research of social sciences, that depends largely on language for its execution and interpretation. Language can create many obstacles to understanding; coupled with cultural differences, as is the case with ICC research, the obstacles can be almost insurmountable. In any case, an awareness of the magnitude of these barriers is required of anybody who attempts to overcome them.

Conclusion

This paper offered a critical evaluation of ICC research with a specific focus on cultural biases that the researchers bring with them. Various limitations have been identified and discussed. A brief summary of the deficiencies of the current research on ICC follows:

1. Lack of clear definitions and operationalizations of ICC, as well as of its components (such as “culture”, “intercultural”, “communication”).
2. Conflicting ideas about the nature of the relationship between interpersonal and intercultural communication.
3. Extensive borrowing of theory and methodology from interpersonal scholars, without proper testing if it applies interculturally.
4. Excessive adherence to the intercultural communication competence paradigms when other terminological paradigms (such as host communication competence,
adaptability, interpersonal communication competence, communication resourcefulness) could provide a better understanding of the subject.

5. Reliance on behavioral approaches in the study of ICC, despite their limitations.

6. Ethnocentric assumptions that appropriateness and effectiveness are equally important to the study of competence across cultures.

7. Lack of a well-developed rationale and justification for conducting the research.

8. Assumptions that the study of competence in general is of equal importance in other cultures as it is in the U. S.

9. Lack of empirical testing.

10. Generalization of findings applicable mostly to the white American college-educated strata to a larger population.

11. Failure to recognize the rhetorical nature of the scientific endeavor.

This list shows that many obstacles stand in the way of attaining the noble goal of improving intercultural relations that so many scholars advocate in the opening and closing sections of their manuscripts. Unfortunately, it also shows that many of these obstacles have to deal with the cultural biases of the researchers themselves. If the scholars are committing the same errors that they are working on to eliminate through their scholarship, how can such an effort be successful?

A solution to this internal contradiction can be found in the work by Kim (2001). Kim describes the ideal of an intercultural man / woman that is a product of successful adaptation to another culture. Following Yoshikawa (1998), she believes that the attainment of this ideal is characterized by the transcendence of the binary perception of the world. When a person becomes truly intercultural, he or she is able to avoid the overly simplistic two valued judgments such as good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate, loser and winner, and to obtain a new perspective on the reality that focuses on the interplay of phenomena and the relativity of our perceptions.
I strongly believe that intercultural communication scholars should strive for this ideal themselves before they engage in making recommendations about improving intercultural communication and share their beliefs with the scholarly community, as well as their wider audiences. They, too, need to transcend their culturally bound perceptions on communication, culture, and the nature and the goal of scholarship in general.
References


