Positioning intercultural dialogue: Theories, pragmatics and an agenda

In recent years, the term *Intercultural Dialogue* has gained considerable currency in both scholarly as well as policymaking contexts. The European Union declared 2008 to be the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and the Council of Europe (2008) published a white paper on the subject, offering a blueprint for how people in the expanded European community might live together across diversity and difference. The increased public visibility and circulation of the term has also prompted academic discussion in multiple venues, including a 2009 National Communication Association summer conference in Istanbul, Turkey, and a pre-conference in Singapore in 2010, as part of the International Communication Association's annual convention.

In this special issue we aim to consolidate emerging interest in intercultural dialogue and inaugurate a productive exchange between scholarship on dialogue and intercultural communication studies, thereby setting an agenda for studies of intercultural dialogue. Extant studies of intercultural dialogue tend to reflect the perspective taken by the European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research, which formulated a working definition for the term:

> Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful
> exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with
> different cultural backgrounds or world views. Among its aims are: to develop
> a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase
> participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality;
> and to enhance creative processes. (Council of Europe, p. 10)

The definition locates intercultural dialogue beyond mere tolerance of the other, and situates deep shared understandings, as well as new forms of creative and expressive communication, as dialogic outcomes. Several studies embody this definition. For instance, Schneider & Von der Emde's (2006) study of dialogic processes amongst German and American students engaged in an intercultural learning project casts dialogue as an open process geared towards deepened understanding. Importantly, the definition does not emphasize consensus as an outcome, leaving room for understanding the potentially dialogic role of conflict as well as consensus and collaboration.

The articles in the present volume explicitly build upon, expand, and critique this conception of intercultural dialogue. First, they elaborate the theoretical terrain of intercultural dialogue studies by drawing on key theorists of dialogue. For instance, Witteborn's study of the discourse of Uyghur diaspora is grounded in Deetz & Simpson's

(2004) propositions about dialogue as a political response, which in turn builds on formulations by Gadamer (1989) and Habermas (1987). And LaFever refers to Buberian definitions of dialogue in analyzing planning and decision-making process involving Gallup, New Mexico and a Navajo Nation community. Second, the papers engage with multiple theories and perspectives on intercultural communication itself. For example, Carbaugh et al rely on cultural codes theories, developed by such scholars as Philipsen (1992), whereas MacLennan's work is based upon Orbe's (1998) formulation of the co-cultural communication perspective.

Understanding dialogic encounters as intercultural offers the potential to view social problems in fresh, new and creative ways; the articles in this volume all reflect a desire to situate intercultural communication processes at the heart of dialogue. However, the articles also indicate a key tension that will continue to inform studies of intercultural dialogue between, on the one hand, perspectives that view all forms of dialogue as always and already intercultural, and on the other, examinations of intercultural dialogue as one form, or site, for dialogic processes.

Understanding intercultural processes as constitutive of dialogue is particularly evident in studies that position *difference* as key points or moments of negotiation in dialogue processes. Such scholarship is likely to view all dialogic encounters as inherently intercultural, embedded in national, political, economic, religious, and historical interests and identities and contexts; they recognize culture as continuously under (re)construction and (re)negotiation; and they acknowledge the complex and diverse relationship webs we enact both within and across groups (Warren, 2008). Witteborn, for example, focuses on the construction of difference in an online discussion forum, establishing how Uyghur cultural identities were crystallizations of historical and political forms of difference. Likewise, MacLennan's treatment of the contradictory character of capoeira, a hybrid Afro-Brazilian cultural practice, highlights ways in which paradoxes are negotiated in any dialogic practice. However, studies of difference (or identity) are not the only way in which cultural issues are at the centre of dialogic processes. Carbaugh et al's project, which describes cultural and linguistic differences in the meaning of words related to dialogue across three languages— Japanese, Korean and Russian—reminds us that what counts as "dialogue," and the particular communication practices it embodies, is culturally produced. As such, this places cultural concerns at the center of any dialogic practice, and it is for this reason that their article leads this volume.

Understanding cultural processes as constitutive of dialogue thus enables us to draw from a broad array of scholarship to increase our appreciation for dialogic practices, and the potential for such development is immense. Indeed, most areas of intercultural communication research, including work on intercultural conflict (e.g., Oetzel, Dhar & Kirschbaum, 2007) or intercultural support (e.g., Mortenson, Burleson, Feng & Liu, 2009) are relevant here. Take, for example, Byram's (2009) notion of the intercultural speaker; someone who draws expertly from skill repertoires in mediation and conflict resolution, is curious and open towards others, and is critically cognizant of and explicit about her/his own values as well as those of the Other. This theoretical construction offers a starting point for developing a skill-based conception of dialogue with intercultural competence at its core.

In addition to exploring the intercultural dimensions of all forms of dialogue, scholars need to investigate the dialogic dimensions of manifestly intercultural settings and encounters, that is, to pre-understand the intercultural as a site for dialogue before examining it. The studies in this volume all do so in self-reflexive ways. MacLennan uses her experience as an outsider practicing capoeira, an art form rooted in historic Afro-Brazilian slave traditions, to understand how it functions as a contradictory contemporary dialogic practice. LaFever's paper uses her own supporting role in a planning process to consider Navajo public spheres as enclaves (Squires, 2002) to appreciate how communicative practices generated by Navajo communities might expand the conduct of their planning meetings with other local communities. Witteborn's understanding of how Han Chinese and Uyghur interlocutors constructed difference emerged from her initial foray into their virtual discussion forum. Carbaugh et al draw on their inter-lingual and inter-cultural positioning to explore meanings of dialogue in Japanese, Korean, and Russian.

Näss (2010) argued that the European Union has an indistinct and ambiguous understanding of the meaning of intercultural dialogue in its policy documents, both as a guiding concept and a political instrument in managing cultural variation. While we appreciate the need for policy to be based on specific definitions, we also note the importance, in academic research, of ambiguity and definitional expansiveness. Key terms in our field—not least of which is "communication" itself—continue to be broadly understood, and from such ambiguity comes creativity, investigation, critique and insight.

In addition to expanding the theoretical terrain of studies of intercultural dialogue, this volume also makes some distinct pragmatic contributions to research on intercultural dialogue. First, Carbaugh et al's study emphasizes the importance of continually questioning dialogue-in-use. While scholars from a multitude of theoretical perspectives argue that a wide

range of communication practices, including conflict, have dialogic aspects, and that dialogue is, and should not be, restricted to practices involving consensus, still dialogue is often culturally constructed as collaboration. Theoretical expansions of dialogue therefore need to be contrasted with and contextualized within its practice in speech communities across the world; in this sense, Carbaugh et al make a valuable contribution towards sensitizing theories of dialogue to the (intercultural) meanings of dialogue in use.

Second, all four studies situate the study of intercultural dialogue as an applied and pragmatic endeavour, using theories as resources for good practice. LaFever's paper, for example, utilizes three perspectives on participation—communicative action, insurgent historiography and spatial production—to identify practical needs for planners to focus on local cultural context, re-education, and the development of innovative communication practices. Witteborn's paper deals with theoretical issues of difference in dialogue in a pragmatic way by identifying specific communication practices that produce difference, including labelling, truth-talk, and anonymity. MacLennan's study, countering the Council of Europe's definition of intercultural dialogue, argues that policymakers need to incorporate contradiction as a core element of intercultural dialogue to manage the complexities of communication in co-cultural groups.

Third, the papers understand issues of dialogue in settings of social inequity, explicitly taking on matters of power. Scholars have questioned the feasibility of dialogue in contexts where power differences are ingrained and acute. Kersten (2005) for example concludes that effective dialogue among well-meaning but powerless participants achieves only interpersonal outcomes, rather than the structural changes required to enable dialogue to be successful. That is, themes of inclusion, openness and representation can create assumptions of equality that obscure existing discriminatory relationships. The problematics of power are thus important to the practices of intercultural dialogue, and the papers discuss these issues in nuanced ways. For instance, LaFever's critical commentary about the continued commodification of Navajo residents in planning processes designed to empower them foregrounds the need for community and city planners to give up power as they enter into dialogue with First Nation communities. Likewise, Witteborn argues that because "predefined and ascribed cultural values might legitimize socioeconomic and political inequalities before dialogue can even start," intercultural dialogue must begin with discussions about difference. MacLennan's reading of capoeira focuses on power differently, illustrating how this historically rich and evocative practice has served as an implicit form of

resistance, while enabling contemporary "outsider" participants to deconstruct their own privilege.

Fourth, the papers show that, in practice, intercultural dialogue cannot be separated from broader processes of conflict. As Carbaugh et al claim, the meanings of dialogue-in-use presume the existence of some sort of social problem or conflict. Dialogue is, at least in common parlance, therefore often positioned as a form of conflict resolution or management. However, the papers here treat the relationship between intercultural dialogue and intercultural conflict in complex ways. MacLennan argues that even as we understand dialogue in terms such as openness, inclusion, equality or intersubjectivity, doing so inaugurates closure, exclusion, hierarchy and subjugation in these very processes. Further, both LaFever and Witteborn implicitly question whether intercultural dialogue is indeed an ideal or universal solution to intercultural conflict.

Finally, the papers position intercultural dialogue as a predominantly ethical issue. While scholars of dialogue have argued that dialogue is at the core of ethics (e.g., Habermas, 1987), the papers here make ethics explicit in at least two ways. First, the papers link intercultural dialogue to issues of social justice and colonization among historically marginalized groups such as Uyghurs, Navajo and African-Brazilian communities. And second, Carbaugh et al's study clarifies that "dialogue," and related words in different languages, resonate in use with a variety of positively regarded values, including harmony and respect (Japan), cooperation and collaboration (Korean), or openness and trust (Russian). Ultimately then, the predominantly ethical character of intercultural dialogue requires approaches that examine the cultural co-production of knowledge through multivocality and inclusiveness (Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama & Yep, 2002).

These studies therefore contribute significantly to research on intercultural dialogue. They illustrate cultural misunderstandings, conflicts, and tensions from different theoretical perspectives; demonstrate interactions and intersections between culture, conflict, and dialogue; and explore detailed and rich cases of cultural problems in contexts. As such, they inaugurate several questions that future research on intercultural dialogue should consider. These include: to what extent is intercultural co-production the outcome of dialogue rather than multicultural co-existence? How can local and international levels of intercultural dialogue be brought together in complementary and informing ways? What are the potentialities and limitations of intercultural dialogue for resolving intercultural conflicts? How can intercultural dialogue productively resolve problems of social (in)justice? How can we articulate an explicitly intercultural ethic of dialogue?

In closing, we point towards the need, not only for more studies of intercultural dialogue, but for such research to engage with scholarship on dialogue in multiple areas of communication inquiry. Studies of dialogue are prominent in organizational communication studies, where researchers have examined issues of stakeholder dialogue (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Interpersonal communication scholars have developed nuanced understandings of Bakhtinian dialogue that combine analyses of interpersonal relationships with processes of social change (Rawlins, 2009). The voluminous literature on communication and the public sphere in both media and rhetorical studies (Squires, 2002) also treats dialogue as central. The time is ripe for studies of intercultural communication to join the larger dialogue on dialogue. We look forward to such engagement.

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