Culture To Culturing

Re-imagining Our Understanding Of Intercultural Relations

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the notion that human beings are culturing beings. I contend that the world's infinite ambiguity is constantly pushing us to construct new and different ways of being and understanding the world. I also argue that verbing our understanding of culture enlarges our understanding of what being human means and, moreover, expands moral action by locating our humanity within a world with an inherent moral potentiality. Finally, I discuss the nature of this emergent morality and the theoretical implications that this emergent quantum understanding of culture brings to bear on intercultural communication theory.

An emergent view in intercultural communication theory is challenging the commonly held view that cultures are stable and homogenous (Belay, 1993; Casmir, 1993; Dervin, 1991; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; McPhail, 1996; Rodriguez, 2003; Said, 2000; Shuter, 1993; Starosta, 1991). The common criticism is that we are masking the many points of conflict, dissent, and diversity that permeate all cultures and, in so doing, masking the full complexity that cultures possess and even create. More importantly, such masking, in exaggerating (really distorting) our perceptions of homogeneity and stability, forces us to adopt dichotomous stances that stop us from "moving toward multiple perspectives that might inform each other in a dialogue of differences" (Dervin, 1991, p. 50). As Said (2001) notes, "There isn't a single Islam: there are Islams, just as there are Americas. This diversity is true of all traditions, religions or nations even though some of their adherents have futiley tried to draw boundaries around themselves and pin their creeds down neatly." We are demanding more complex

understandings of how we constitute cultures so as to reflect and speak better to the complexity, discontinuity, and diversity that all cultures inherently possess and to devise means to have more constructive and nonviolent ways to deal with our rich and infinite differences. We are therefore more and more writing about *placing* and *racing* and *differencing* instead of ethnicity and race and difference so as to afford a more heuristic understanding of the complexity, discontinuity, and diversity that constitute race, ethnicity, and difference (Dervin, 1991; Fry, 1998; Olmsted, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998, Said, 2000).

In this paper I push forward this emergent transitive verb trend by viewing human beings as *culturing* beings. I define culturing as our proclivity to construct new and different meanings, understandings, and practices so as to reckon with the world's infinite ambiguity and quantum nature that constantly destabilize extant meanings, understandings, and practices. We are always constructing new and different ways of being and understanding the world, which is to say that cultures are always reckoning with instability and change. No culture is inherently stable and homogenous. Culturing is born out of our uniquely human need to bring meaning to bear upon the world's ambiguity. It represents the various tensions and rhythms that come with our trying to find and hold onto meanings in a world that is inherently quantum in consciousness. Thus, this paper forwards a quantum understanding of culture. Such an understanding, I argue, allows us to look anew at what being human means and expands moral action by locating our humanity within a potentially moral world. It answers the call for "a way to acknowledge and accept those aspects of dialectical inquiry that contribute to self-reflection and the appreciation of Otherness, and at the same time cultivate an awareness of those aspects that perpetuate symbolic violence" (McPhail, 1996, p. 150). It also gives us a theoretical and political way "to step back from the imaginary thresholds that separate people from each other" by releasing us from the dichotomous labels and positionalities that come with such thresoholds (Said, 2001).

This paper begins with a look at the ontological foundation that makes cultures inherently quantum. Cultures are constantly negotiating the interplay between ambiguity and meaning, chaos and order, homogeneity and diversity, equilibrium and disequilibrium, agency and structure, and other such quantum and dialectical tensions. The result being that cultures are always in flux (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). I argue that cultures evolve and expand by encouraging the rich interplay between all quantum tensions, especially that of meaning and ambiguity (Bateson, 1994; Bohm, 1996). Through this evolution and expansion cultures promote the evolution of new and different ways of understanding and experiencing the world. What emerges is a culturing ethos that promotes interpretation and reinterpretation, and, in so doing, pushes us to be more open to new and different ways of understanding and experiencing the world. Such an ethos therefore blocks the formation of rigid positionalities that tend to pit us violently against each other (Bateson, 1994; Bohm, 1996; Said, 2000). The paper ends with a discussion of three epistemological implications that a quantum understanding of culture brings to bear on intercultural communication theory.

The Relation Between Ambiguity and Meaning

Cultures are organic systems. As with other such systems, all cultures have points of homogeneity and diversity, continuity and discontinuity, stability and instability, meaning and ambiguity, order and chaos (Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1983; Gribbin, 1984; Herbert, 1987; Jantsch, 1980). Instinctively, cultures—like any other organic system—strive to affirm life so as to evolve and expand. Conversely, practices and forces that undercut the evolution of cultures make for the demise of such cultures. To survive and prosper cultures therefore have to change and evolve by promoting the forces and practices that make for change and evolution. Integral to the promotion of such change and evolution is ambiguity (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984).

Meaning and ambiguity are ontologically intertwined (Janstch, 1980; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). A world devoid of ambiguity is one devoid of meaning. Each defines the other by making for the existence of each other. As such, ambiguity and meaning more than simply define each other; they actually constitute and embed each other. So there is always meaning in ambiguity and ambiguity in meaning. No meaning is ever completely stable, that is, ever beyond the reach of a new and different interpretation. There is much heuristic purchase in this inextricable relation between ambiguity and meaning. Ambiguity challenges us to look at the world anew. It expands our humanity by forcing us to develop new meanings, new ways of experiencing and being in the world. In this way, ambiguity fosters diversity and evolution. It is a life catalyst, or, according to Mary Catherine Bateson (1994), "the warp of life." Systems that focus deterministically on eliminating ambiguity allow for no growth, no evolution, and, ironically, no order (Bohm, 1996). Ambiguity therefore makes for open and vibrant systems—the only systems that evolve and strive.

Ambiguity makes for new experiences, new understandings, new ways of being, and new kinds of relations with each other by keeping meaning incomplete. Regardless of our most strenuous efforts, no meaning, again, is ever absolute, ever devoid of ambiguity, or ever devoid of interpretation. The ambiguity of the world keeps meaning in a constant state of flux and openness (Bateson, 1994). There is always the occasion for a new and different interpretation. Meaning is always multivocal and incomplete (Bohm, 1996; Lee, Wang, et al. 1995). As such, ambiguity poses a constant threat to the status quo. It constantly pushes us to look at the world differently by inherently destabilizing how we understand the world. Yet it is this jamming that life finds inspiration through the realization of new interpretations. The inherent incomplete nature of meaning therefore makes our worlds and cultures quantum by constantly promoting the evolution of new ways of being and understanding the world. In worlds and cultures where meaning is embraced as being inherently incomplete, life evolves and prospers through the constant evolution of new and different meanings. Abdulkarim Soroosh, who is seen by many scholars as Iran's boldest contemporary theologian, and who faces constant persecution from Iran's religious autocracy, makes this point well:

> The essence of religion will always be sacred, but its interpretation
> by fallible human beings is not sacred—and therefore can be
> criticized, modified, refined, and redefined. What single person
> can say what God meant? Any fixed version would effectively
> smother religion. It would block the rich exploration of the sacred
> texts. Interpretations are also influenced by the age you live in, by

the conditions and mores of the era, and by other branches of that knowledge. So there's no single, inflexible, or absolute interpretation of Islam for all time. (Wright, 1999, pp. 46-47)

We can never end or completely command the world's ambiguity. It exceeds and precedes us. Yet without ambiguity life has no meaning. It is ambiguity that catalyzes and inspires our proclivity for meaning, and through meaning life finds expression and articulation. Still we persist in trying to rid the world of ambiguity. We claim that soon we will be able "to know the mind of God" and find the "final theory" that will explain the origins and workings of the world. Of course absolutism abounds many spheres of many cultures. However, our ambition to end the world's ambiguity is born out of a deep fear of the world. We assume no moral, existential, or spiritual connection between the world and us. Instead, we assume that the world is in conflict with us and, consequently, our own survival and prosperity is dependent on us forcefully and coercively subduing and controlling the supposed malevolent forces of the world that seem bent on destroying us. We also assume that ambiguity threatens meaning. We focus on reducing and managing ambiguity. We construe the relation between meaning and ambiguity dualistically and oppositionally rather than dialectically and holistically. We remain committed to developing sciences, machines, and techniques that end the world's ambiguity, complexity, and mystery (Bohm, 1996).

But the world no longer seems tolerant of our ambitions to end its ambiguity. It seems to have had enough of the horrors that such an ambition exacts on the weak and innocent. So as we persist in the illusion of positing absolute and complete meanings, understandings, and truths, the world also seems to be reasserting its ambiguity, complexity, and diversity. For example, we are increasingly dismantling long held notions of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. More and more of us belong to every place, every race, and worship all Gods. We are more and more writing about *racing, placing,* and hopefully soon, *culturing*. Understandings of identity are becoming increasingly complex, incomplete, and fluid (Chen & Starosta, 1996). We are increasingly describing ourselves as human rather than, say, Antiguan or Indian; sexual rather than heterosexual or homosexual; spiritual rather than religious, and so forth. New sciences, writings, paradigms, and fields of study that stress union rather than separation are also emerging. And though Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg promises to uphold reductionism to the end, holism is seen by other Nobel Laureates like Freeman Dyson and Ilya Prigogine as the path we must now take to understand a world that ontologically resists absolute and complete truths and understandings (see Weinberg, 1995 & 2001). Ambiguity, again, will always exceed and precede meaning.

Communication is also acknowledging this emergent quantum worldview and reflecting different ways that it reshapes and expands our understanding of communication (Contractor, 1994; Cottone, 1993; McPhail, 1996; Murphy, 1996; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998; Witte, Meyer, et al., 1996). McPhail (1996) contends that this emergent paradigm makes for a new rhetoric by getting us beyond the separation that duality fosters. Our "belief in separatedness has, indeed, made us strangers, and has created a language of negative difference which manifests itself in the social and symbolic spaces of race, gender, and rhetoric" (p 66).

4

In the following section of this paper I look at how a quantum understanding of the relation between ambiguity and meaning helps us identify communication practices that promote the evolution of cultures and, thereby, more constructive ways of negotiating our infinite differences. I examine the potentiality of such an understanding to help "lessen the threats of our differences" by drawing upon the intertwine relation between homogeneity and diversity.

Rhythms, Tensions, and Meanings

All organic systems have points of disequilibrium that constantly disrupt the status quo. These points reflect different interpretations, meanings, and truths that make for conflict and dissent. For example, forests fires resulting from natural forces represent points of disequilibrium. Yet such fires are vital for the well-being of forests by allowing for the burning of underbrush and old trees that encumber forests' ecosystems from evolving and flourishing. Points of disequilibrium perform a vital function by blocking natural systems from becoming completely homogeneous, that is, from becoming beholden to one understanding of the world. Moreover, such points undercut the reifying and deifying of certain ways of being and, in so doing, act as catalysts for evolution and transformation. Conversely, through the suppression of such points organic systems lose the ability to respond flexibly and creatively to new situations. Points of disequilibrium therefore affirm life by constantly contesting and disrupting the status quo; pushing the system to realize new expressions.

So all cultures possess a striving to evolve, and through such evolution find prosperity. But such evolution is dependent on cultures promoting the rich interplay between meaning and ambiguity. This requires cultures realizing those rhythms that promote new meanings and interpretations while simultaneously allowing for the devolution of current meanings and interpretations. Integral to finding these rhythms is the promotion of ways of being that encourage the incomplete nature of meaning, that is, understandings of communication that promote interpretation rather than transmission. As McPhail observes (1996), "Communication, as it has been practiced and continues to be practiced in Western culture, is geared towards social control and the maintenance of existing ideological and epistemological structures" (p. 138). However, such an understanding of communication still pervades intercultural communication theory (Martin & Nakayama, 1999; McPhail, 1996). In many cases, we still treat communication as a medium phenomenon—communication conveys and articulates culture. Communication emerges as a representational rather than ontological phenomenon, which is to say a way of representing rather than a way of embodying our worlds. In persisting in looking at communication in terms of transmission, we help perpetuate the view that cultures are stable and homogenous and thus amenable to reductionistic methodologies that strive to make complete and absolute claims.

Viewing communication as transmission—a bedrock assumption of popular definitions of culture—assumes that human beings are passive to the world. We are supposedly molded by prevailing discursive, communicative, and performative practices. We conceptualize the relationship between culture and communication as causal and deterministic (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). We

assume that cultural patterns can theoretically predict behavior. Accordingly, exaggerated notions of stability and homogeneity permeate many popular definitions of culture (Dervin, 1991; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Moon, 1996). Deetz (1995) contends that viewing communication as transmission misses the politics of self construction. It depoliticizes communication by masking issues of identity formation and blocking scrutiny of the deep ideological structures that constrict meaning creation processes. For Deetz (1995), " Communication is about dialogic, collaborative constructions of self, other, and world in the process of making collective decisions. This includes the production and reproduction of personal identities, social knowledge, and social structures" (p. 107). Communication places and displaces us. It simultaneously gives us an understanding of the world while simultaneously undercutting that understanding of the world. For instance, we never mirror our experiences or our thoughts. Each retelling creates new experiences, new meanings, new understandings, and, often, even new truths. In this way, communication enables us by affording us constant access to new experiences, new meanings, and new understandings (Arthos, 2000; Gordon, 2000).

A quantum world needs understandings of communication that can speak to its quantum proclivity. Such understandings can be found in emergent definitions of communication that ontologically assume no separation between communication and the world (e.g., Bohm, 1996; Thayer, 1995). Such definitions stress a consequential rather than referential understanding of communication (Thayer, 1995). That is, emergent definitions of communication hold to the quantum notion that the world and us are embedded within each other. Communication situates us in the world rather than is the means to represent the world. As Thayer (1995) notes, "In naming the world, we name ourselves; in explaining the world, we explain ourselves; in defining the world, we define ourselves" (p. 9). Through communication we construct as well as embody our worlds. However, such constructing and embodying is by no means arbitrary. As Martin Buber, Paulo Freire, David Bohm, and many other proponents of dialogue long argued, some communication practices are more heuristic and humane than others. Those practices that embrace ambiguity pull us towards the center of the world and thereby align us with the world's quantum rhythms. Such communication practices allow us to ebb and flow to these tensions. Meaning remains open and fluid and, in being so, allows us to also remain open and fluid. Thus how we embody, construct, understand, and relate to the world are all deeply intertwine and inseparable processes.

But many practices threaten the rich interplay between ambiguity and meaning. Arguably, one of the most serious and insidious is that of reification. Reification is the gateway to alienation and deification. It aims to limit human action by limiting ambiguity. It seduces us by limiting the anxiety that comes with ambiguity. In limiting human action, however, reification limits volition and, consequently, responsibility. It thus limits our obligation and commitment to each other and, in so doing, promotes separation and fragmentation. Reification also encumbers the evolution of new and different ways of being and understanding the world by promoting rigidity rather than flexibility. It does so by subtly turning us away from the world's ambiguity. We thereby lose the courage to fully embrace the ambiguity that is vital for new thoughts, ideas, experiences, understandings, and meanings to enter the world. In this way,

reification also undercuts diversity and plurality. Finally, reification blocks the formation of the deep and complex human relations that flow from vibrant meaning creation and interpretive processes. In *Developing Through Relationships*, Alan Fogel (1993) writes about how reification harms the evolution of such relations:

> When relationships evolve into patterns in which participants perceive them as sequences of discrete exchanges or reward and cost it is quite likely that the creativity has gone out of them. They are no longer dynamic systems in which individuals grow, they have become prisons of the soul. Repeated encounters, therefore, can sometimes dull the senses and produce hatred, anger, and boredom. It is not mere repetition that leads to creative elaboration, it is one's stance toward the other, one's openness to change and desire to create new meaning through the relationship. (p. 90)

Fogel also writes that "Relationships must have . . . something not quite known, something that may never be understood or even articulated, something that entices the mind and body and that renews the meaning in the relationship" (p. 90). Put differently, cultures evolve by promoting incompletion. But more importantly, through the promotion of incompletion we also realize our own potentiality to construct realities that actually promote diversity and plurality. Incompletion therefore encourages a dialogic communication sensibility.

Such a sensibility assumes that we quest for completion, that we possess the capacity to act deliberately upon the world, that we become fully human only through practices that promote affirmation, empathy, openness, and trust, that an existential, moral, and even spiritual relation exists between the world and us, and that the world is incomplete (Arnett, 1986; Buber, 1970 & 1994; Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Freire, 1993; Gordon, 2000; Murray, 2000; Shotter, 2000). Through dialogic communication we contribute to the world's creation and completion. Our becoming is entwined with that of the world. Practices that harm our becoming also harm the becoming of the world. As such, a dialogic sensibility encourages us to be open, sensitive, and tolerant of new ways of understanding and experiencing the world (Czubaroff & Friedman, 2000; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Rodriguez, 2001). We are to dialogue with (rather than against) others to achieve mutual understandings and realize new possibilities.

In remaining pages of this paper I look at three different ways that *culturing* expands intercultural communication theory and heightens the ferment emerging in intercultural communication studies that views culture relationally, dialectically, and holistically (Belay, 1993; Casmir, 1993; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; McPhail, 1996; Shuter, 1993; Starosta, 1991).

New Vistas and New Possibilities

Understandably, intercultural communication theory has a deep tradition against claims of different cultures being morally superior to other cultures. Much good has come from upholding this tradition. But emergent observations of the world are forcing us to reckon with the claim that we have no ontological or epistemological ground upon which to make moral claims about different cultures. To look at cultures from a quantum standpoint allows us to move beyond the horrors that attend to cultural hegemony while simultaneously

allowing us to make moral claims about different cultures. We accomplish this feat in the most interesting of ways.

Adopting a *culturing* standpoint reveals how the constant evolving and changing nature of cultures constantly undermines efforts to establish and sustain cultural hegemony. Culturing highlights the quantum tensions and contradictions that define all cultures. We simultaneously see the homogeneity and diversity, the stability and instability, the order and the chaos, and so forth. We also see the political, moral, and existential struggles, and the many contests over meanings, interpretations, and symbols that define all cultures. We ultimately come to understand that claims of cultural uniformity and stability will always be illusory. There will always be spaces where hope resides.

Thus *culturing* gives us a moral direction rather than a moral destination. It promotes communication practices that stress diversity, sensitivity, and other ways of being that make or intend for no harm to others and the world. In this way, *culturing* does make for a superior morality. For example, cultures where peoples of different understandings, truths, and even gods, live peacefully with each other are indeed morally superior to other cultures where such peoples are persecuted, maimed, and killed for simply being Other. In sum, *culturing* does give us a way to understand which communication and cultural practices acknowledge and appreciate Otherness and difference, while at the same time cultivating "an awareness of those aspects that perpetuate symbolic violence" (McPhail, 1996, p. 150).

But *culturing* gives us more than a moral direction. It also acknowledges, even celebrates, the cultural commonalities that morally bound us together, and, in so doing, "lessens the threats of our [cultural] differences." All cultures are constantly grappling with the interplay between ambiguity and meaning and the other quantum tensions that this interplay sets off. Yet *culturing* demystifies cultures without destroying or infringing on their inherent complexity. It gives us a heuristic means to understand cultures without making us believe that our understandings can ever be or need to be complete and absolute. Cultural complexity makes for inherent mystery. But now we no longer need to be afraid of this mystery. It reflects the infinite potentiality that undergirds all cultures. So whereas intercultural communication theory has long focused on describing what is, *culturing* allows us now to also consider what can be and also what needs to be.

Finally, in a world where recent horrendous events seem to be endorsing the hypothesis about the coming "clash of civilizations," culturing reframes our understanding of cultures in a way that neither undermines hope nor the possibility of us forging new ways of being together with others who seem to be so culturally different and alien to us, even to the point of being seen as less human than us. Hope resides in the points of disruption, disequilibrium, and dissent that constantly destabilize the status quo. Hope also resides in the quantum tugging found in all organic systems. No culture can escape the quantum order of the world. Cultures that focus on ending ambiguity and diversity will eventually devolve. The quantum order of the world will tolerate only so much variability. In this way, though never certain, redemption is always possible; that is, there is always the possibility for more constructive and nonviolent ways of being together to emerge and make for new realities. Thus "for future generations to condemn themselves to prolonged war and suffering

without so much as a critical pause, without looking at interdependent histories of injustice and oppression, without trying for common emancipation and mutual understanding seems far more willful than necessary" (Said, 2001).

Conclusion

Verbing our understanding of culture assumes that human beings are fundamentally relational beings with a striving and potentiality for communion with the world and each other. We are *culturing* beings—always constructing and deconstructing cultures. Common understandings of culture mask the natural tensions that cultures possess and which are so vital for their prosperity. This, again, is a world of chaos and order, ambiguity and meaning, homogeneity and diversity, stability and instability, and equilibrium and disequilibrium. Cultures, like all organic entities, are constantly negotiating these quantum tensions. Yet these tensions are natural catalysts for life's evolution and expansion. Through the evolution and expansion of our cultures our humanity evolves and expands. It seems therefore that our redemption and that of the world is *sacredly* intertwined.

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