Assessment 2.2:

Intercultural Communication Major Essay

Intercultural Communication

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In 2019, the need for effective interpersonal intercultural communication that traverses societal boundaries is indisputable, due to globalisation and the steadfast advance of digitisation. This form of communication plays a pivotal role as it is a reciprocal process of understanding between and across diverse groups of people, through the use of language(s) and identifying, learning from and acting upon situational and cultural cues. I have chosen three experiences that span the past three decades, that at the time, challenged my concept of what was 'normal', to exemplify my contemporary thoughts on intercultural communication. This essay will focus on the key sociological ideas of borders, trust, and categories, in particular membership categorisation within the following interactions. The first, in 1996 with a prison visitor denied entry due to insufficient identification after the introduction of new state government identification standards, a 2006 state health directorate workshop interaction involving trust issues and lastly my exchange of cultural groups following a contact experience whilst I attended and reviewed a ufology sky watching event in 2013.

In 1996, following the introduction of new state government prison visitor identification standards, I found myself in a temporary training role situated within a prison's reception area, assisting guards with a new software visitation program. On the second day of training, a young woman presented insufficient identification, and after being informed by myself that her visit would not transpire became verbally abusive and violent. She spat and pounded on the bulletproof glass hard border that separated the two of us. The visitor invoking a border resistance register which led to her identity loss (Comfort 2003, p. 103), and physical restraint by the guards who deployed their own known register to deal with the situation.

As I left the reception area that day, a number of hard borders presented themselves to me, the armed guards, locked gates, bulletproof glass walls, surveilled spaces that were accessible to myself, but not to the visitors (Barth 1969, p. 30). When the visitor reacted to her visit's cancellation, I observed my environment change from a safe space to an alien one, a soft border that had not been visible prior (Purdy & Manning 2015, p. 3). From the visitor's perspective, her aggressive response to the visit's cancellation was

her 'normal' reaction. Her reaction created a conflict hot-spot within the reception area, as it indicated that she refused to cooperate with the prison border documentation ritual (Khosravi 2007, p. 330). I observed drugs being found on the visitor during her restraint, her criminal action damaging the soft border that separated the prison from society (Turner 2016, pp. 46-47).

During the interaction, other visitors within the reception area started to use bad language toward the guards. The restrained visitor, and the other visitors present shared a common understanding that there were two distinct groups of people inside the reception area. Both groups behaviour and show of unity epitomising Leudar, Marsland and Nekvapil's (2004, p. 249) understanding, and representation of 'us' and 'them', and in this example, 'us' being the visitors and 'them' the guards and staff.

In this border-related intercultural communication example, what I assumed to be 'normal' and took for granted was that the reception area was a safe environment. In addition, I believed that visitors, staff and guards all shared the same cultural group. I had not considered back in 1996 that the visitors viewed the guards and staff as adversaries, and in a different category from themselves, from a cultural perspective.

In 2006, as part of a service desk software project for a state government health directorate, I led a diverse team of people in the creation of a state-wide configuration management database (CMDB). My team comprised two distinct groups of people, long-term in-house stakeholders and temporary consultants. Trust-related issues arose quickly, due to tight deadlines between the stakeholder and the consultant groups. To ensure no future deadlines would be missed, I scheduled a full-day workshop to focus on team dynamics and the concerns of members from both groups.

I observed the consultant group, accusing the stakeholder group of placing a series of roadblocks in their way. Moreover, they demanded that communication start to flow both ways between the two groups (Pablo et al. 2007, p. 704). The consultant group put forward their stereotypical category perception of the stakeholder group membership as inefficient, incompetent, prone to refuse engagement and going out of their way to avoid accountability.

Neveu and Kakavand (2019, p. 503) concluded that 'a lack of trust can … trigger behaviours of self-interest'. I witnessed the stakeholder group confirm this when they admitted to shielding themselves from any project-related risk.

Negative practices that the stakeholder group engaged in included non-endorsement of documentation, workshop and meeting cancellation, and a habit of ignoring email communications. They also stated that their behaviour was due to an entrenched health directorate-wide 'blame' culture, and previous unfavourable experiences working alongside consultants. Another stereotypical category emerged through further stakeholder engagement, that depicted consultants as overpaid, wasteful and with insufficient health-related knowledge.

From my perspective, no project deliverables would eventuate until both groups amended their actions and thoughts concerning their peers. The stakeholder group needed to be willing to take on risk by making decisions in partnership with the consultant group, within workshops (Kerekes, Lemak & Perhan 2013, p. 270). Both groups' membership needed to amend their stereotypical views and judgements of each other to ensure open collaboration was possible.

Based on past experience within private company projects, what I assumed to be a project-related 'norm' was that all employees seek to collaborate, have meaningful interactions and show a willingness to take on risk so that mutual trust will manifest, and the project will succeed. What I did not contemplate in 2006 was the possibility that government employees are not as invested or incentivised in the same manner as private owners, and their employees to deliver a united group-based outcome.

In 2013, in my role as a magazine editor and researcher, I was given the opportunity to review and to attend a weekend workshop at Bond university on the Gold Coast hosted by Dr. Steven Greer. He is an American former trauma surgeon, and founder of the Center for the Study of Extraterrestrial Intelligence (CSETI). The event comprised two full-day lectures and two evening sky watching meditation sessions that were designed through a set of protocols, mostly hand gestures and thought mantras, to attract alien crafts and entities.

During the second evening's sky watching protocols, I had an unnerving and inexplicable contact experience with a group of entities that did not look like any human or animal I had seen previously. In that moment, I moved from being firmly in the 'sceptic/denier' category, into the 'contactee' category proving that categorisation is adaptable and its memberships to be open

(Leudar, Marsland & Nekvapil 2004, p. 249). I realised that I was no longer philosophically aligned with accepted societal views on ufology within traditional media, which made me an exception within the 'media researcher' category membership as I now shared attributes with an opposing thought category. My new association resulted in my 'media researcher' category membership being deemed faulty and open to value judgements, and stereotypical labels and associated nuances. The 'contactee' category communal soft border that determined this groupings variation to other category's and its group power structure, became apparent to me during the unexpected encounter when a couple of nearby ufologists began to perform protocol hand gestures which exhibited their group membership within the 'contactee' category (Guetzkow & Fast 2016, p. 152).

Looking back over the past several years, my 'contactee' categorisation has provided access to generational inherited knowledge, groups, organisations and individuals. Avenues to people, who do not usually engage with representatives from the mainstream media. My 'contactee' status placed me in a privileged social hierarchy that has led to a number of speaking opportunities at conferences and events, as well as a three year radio show on Revolution Radio in the United States of America.

In conclusion, this essay focussed on the key sociological ideas of borders, trust, and categories. In particular, membership categorisation and how I have used these concepts to reflect upon three past intercultural encounters that challenged my concept of what I thought was 'normal' during the experience. My understanding of intercultural communication is strengthened by the facts that borders have an immense impact on prison visitor identity, rituals and their perspective on visitor and guard cultural group segregation; that without mutual trust generated through collaboration, meaningful interactions and a willingness to take a risk, communication becomes dysfunctional; and finally, that group categorisation assists our understanding of what is considered to be normal and inherited from one generation to the next.

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Coverpage image depicts students communicating (Fauxels 2019)