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Georg Simmel's Concept of the Stranger and Intercultural Communication Research

The stranger, defined by Georg Simmel as an individual who is a member of a system but who is not strongly attached to the system, influenced (1) such important concepts as social distance, the marginal man, heterophily, and cosmopolitanism, (2) the value on objectivity in social science research, and (3) to a certain extent, the specialty field of intercultural communication. Here we explore these influences of Simmel's theory of human communication, especially his concept of the stranger, and highlight certain implications for the contemporary study of intercultural communication.

This present essay traces the evolutionary process through which the original conceptualization of the stranger by the German sociologist Georg Simmel at the turn of the century influenced several concepts important in communication research, the value on objectivity in communication study (and in other social science research), and, to a certain extent, the field of intercultural communication.

Our conceptual tracing of this history helps illuminate the largely unrecognized intellectual debt owed by contemporary communication scholars to the Chicago School of Sociology, which flourished from 1915 to 1935. The Chicago sociologists, in turn, based their pioneering empirical investigations on theories imported from Germany, especially the concepts of Georg Simmel (Rogers, 1994). Simmel's theory of the stranger has a low profile in the work of most contemporary communication researchers, who generally do not cite his concepts and theories.¹

This paper traces the intellectual influences of Simmel's theoretical perspective through the Chicago School sociologists into social science research on human communication, especially intercultural communication and stresses the implications of Simmel's theory for research on intercultural communication.

Georg Simmel and Communication Study

Georg Simmel's scholarly career flourished from 1880 until approximately 40 years later. Simmel's scholarly interests ranged widely, and his

contributions cannot be classified into a single academic discipline. He is today mainly known as a sociologist, and indeed he taught a course in sociology at the University of Berlin (one of the first such courses in a German university) and wrote an important book on sociology, *Soziologie* (Simmel, 1908). Other courses and many of his books dealt with philosophy (Simmel, 1900/1978), but he also wrote about the diffusion of fashions (Simmel, 1904/1975), small-group communication, and the nature of interpersonal networks (Simmel, 1922/1955), topics that today are part of communication study.

In most of his sociological, philosophical, and other scholarly writings, Simmel reflected a basic perspective on human communication, a viewpoint that was at the heart of his theorizing. He was a predecessor to symbolic interactionism, believing that human behavior could be understood through learning how individuals give meaning to the symbolic information that they exchange with others.²

Simmel as a Stranger

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) was one of the forefathers of sociology, along with August Comte, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Simmel earned his doctorate at the University of Berlin, one of the main models for the American research university (Rogers, 1994), and taught there for most of his career. Despite his brilliance as a professor, as a productive scholar, and as an original thinker, Simmel was not promoted from the rank of *Privatdozent*, something equivalent to an unpaid, untenured adjunct professor at a U.S. university today. A Privatdozent collected fees from the students attending his or her lectures (*Kopfgeld*, or “headmoney”). Simmel’s lectures were very well attended (in fact, they were held in the largest lecture hall at the University of Berlin). “Simmel was somewhat of a showman” (Coser, 1977, p. 196). His lectures were especially intriguing to his audiences because he seemed to be thinking out loud. “A lecture by Simmel was creation-at-the-moment-of-delivery: The essence of Simmel’s spell seems to have been the spontaneous exemplification of the creative process” (Wolff, 1950, p. xvii). Simmel’s lecture style was described as follows: “He [Simmel] was considered one of the most brilliant, if not the most brilliant, lecturer of his time. . . . Many of Simmel’s lectures were public events and often described as such in the newspapers” (Coser, 1959).

Although a scholar recognized for his eminence in Europe and America, Simmel was rebuffed by the academic community in Germany in his desire for a full professorship (Coser, 1977, p. 195). Simmel seemed to depend for approval on his lecture audiences, rather than striving for recognition by his academic colleagues (Coser, 1959). Simmel’s nonconformist behavior as a professor is also illustrated by his publishing record. Of the 180 articles published by Simmel during his lifetime, the ratio of his work published in scholarly outlets decreased from 50 percent in his

early career to 25 percent later in his career, when he had given up hope of promotion to professor (Coser, 1959).

The topics of Simmel's lectures, and of the books and articles that he wrote, varied widely. Simmel stated that he could "Simmelize" (that is, make a theoretical analysis of) almost any topic. This wide range of interests did not help advance Simmel's career. Ortega y Gasset compared him to "a kind of philosophical squirrel, jumping from one nut to another" (Coser, 1965, p. 3).

The topics that Simmel chose to analyze were related to his personal life experiences. Simmel was the son of Jewish parents who converted to Christianity. He experienced anti-Semitism and this prejudice may have been one reason for his lack of academic advancement. The model for his concept of the stranger was the Jewish trader:

Throughout the history of economics the stranger everywhere appears as the trader, or the trader as stranger. . . . The stranger . . . intrudes . . . into a group in which the economic positions are actually occupied—the classical example is the history of European Jews." (Simmel, 1950, p. 403)

As Robert E. Park, the American sociologist who introduced Simmel's theories to U.S. scholars, stated: "The emancipated Jew was, and is, historically and typically the marginal man, the first cosmopolite and citizen of the world. He is, par excellence, the 'stranger,' which Simmel, himself a Jew, has described with such profound insight and understanding" (1928. p. 882).

Simmel's Stranger and Intercultural Communication

Simmel's concept of the stranger (*der Fremde* in German), and its intellectual descendants of social distance, the marginal man, and heterophily, are particularly important to the specialty field of intercultural communication. This field is commonly traced to its beginnings by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall at the Foreign Service Institute in the 1951–1955 period. "The story of intercultural communication begins at the Foreign Service Institute" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990). Hall was one of the first to use the term *intercultural communication*, and his book, *The Silent Language* (Hall, 1959), contained many of the perspectives later emphasized by scholars of intercultural communication. However, as I attempt to show in this paper, a basic focus of intercultural communication, that of a communication relationship between two or more people who are dissimilar, can be traced to Georg Simmel's concept of the stranger, explicated a half century before Hall's important book.

Simmel's theoretical perspective on communication can be summarized as follows (Levine, Carter, & Gorman, 1976):

1. Society consists of communication among individuals.
2. All human communication consists of exchange that has reciprocal effects on the individuals involved.
3. Communication occurs among individuals who are at varying degrees of social distance from one another.³
4. Communication satisfies certain basic human needs, such as for companionship, to express aggression, or to pursue certain desired goals.
5. Certain types of communication become relatively stable over time, and thus represent culture and social structure.

Intercultural communication, defined as the exchange of information between individuals who are unlike culturally (Rogers & Steinfatt, in press), has been broadened in recent years to include communication across gender, ethnic, age, and other variables that may affect human communication. So the meaning of “culture” in the field of “intercultural” communication has been generalized beyond its earlier meaning of *national* culture. Later in this paper, we argue that this broadening might have occurred earlier had the pioneers of intercultural communication been more fully aware of Simmel’s perspective.

Simmel’s Concept of the Stranger

The stranger, as defined by Simmel (1950, p. 402), is an individual who is a member of a system but is not strongly attached to that system.⁴ “The stranger is . . . not . . . the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather is the person who comes today and stays tomorrow” (Simmel, 1950, p. 402). Perhaps the stranger is a recent migrant to the system, who retains the freedom of coming and going. The stranger does not conform completely to the norms of the system.⁵ The stranger’s interpersonal relationships with others in the system are characterized by social distance: “Distance means that he, who is close by, is far, and strangeness means that he, who also is far, is actually near” (Simmel, 1950, p. 402). An individual can be a member of a system in a spatial sense, but not be a member in a social sense (McLemore, 1970).

Simmel’s insights on the role of the stranger were part of his general concern with the relationships between the individual and the systems of which the individual is a member, and in how these cross-level relationships influence the individual’s behavior.⁶ For example, Simmel (1922/1955, p. 140) stated: “The groups with which the individual is affiliated constitute a system of coordinates, as it were, such that each new group with which he becomes affiliated circumscribes him more exactly and more ambiguously.” In this sense, an individual’s social networks serve to limit the individual’s actions. The stranger, relatively free of such network links in his or her system, can more easily deviate from the norms of the system.

Whereas the stranger is often viewed with suspicion (and perhaps xenophobia) by others in the system because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the stranger's behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), there are unique advantages to the individual and to the system of such distanced perspectives: "To be a stranger is naturally a very positive relation" (Simmel, 1950, p. 402). The stranger sees the system in a different light than do others. Many works of fiction are built on the arrival of a stranger in a system (McLemore, 1970), so that the system is described through the eyes of an outsider.⁷

The stranger's viewpoint may be more objective. "He is not radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of 'objectivity.' . . . It is a particular structure composed of distance and nearness, indifference and involvement" (Simmel, 1950, p. 404). As an example of the advantages of the stranger's objectivity, Simmel cited the practice in Italian cities of selecting their judges from the outside, so that they would be free from entanglement in family and party interests. "The objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception, understanding, and evaluation of the given" (Simmel, 1950, p. 405).

The Chicago School

The Chicago School, which flourished at the University of Chicago from 1915 to 1935, introduced German theories like Simmel's to America and implemented them in empirical research on the social problems of Chicago. The University of Chicago, one of the first research universities in America, was founded in 1892 with the financial assistance of John D. Rockefeller, then the richest man in the world. Thanks to its ample resources, the University of Chicago was able to raid other universities for their star professors, and, within only a few years of its establishment, it was a highly prestigious university (Rogers, 1994, pp. 139–145).

The first department of sociology in the United States was established at the University of Chicago in 1892, and it soon grew to completely dominate this new field. The so-called Chicago School was known for its studies of social problems like prostitution, poverty, crime, and racial conflict in the low-income areas near the Midway campus in south Chicago. This research was funded by the Rockefeller family and was strongly influenced by Simmel's theories. Albion Small, founder and chair of the Department of Sociology at Chicago, translated 15 of Simmel's writings and published them as articles in the *American Journal of Sociology*, which he edited.⁸ The two most influential members of the Chicago School, George Herbert Mead and Robert E. Park, had pursued graduate study at the University of Berlin and enrolled in courses taught by

Simmel (Rogers, 1994, pp. 137–202). So in various ways the Chicago School served as the main intellectual channel through which Simmel's theories were imported to the United States and implemented in empirical research. One of the important ideas thus transferred was that of the stranger.

The Stranger and Objectivity

The key scholar in translating and applying Simmel's concept was Robert E. Park, a former newspaper reporter who earned his PhD degree in Germany. In 1900 Park took Simmel's course in sociology at the University of Berlin. It gave him the fundamental perspective of communication and society for which he had been searching. After his return to the United States, Park worked for Booker T. Washington, the leading African American leader of the day, as a public relations assistant at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Out of this experience in the American South, Park gained an understanding of individuals of mixed racial ancestry, from which he developed his concept of the marginal man (Hughes, 1980, p. 69).

In 1915, at the age of 50, Park began teaching sociology at the University of Chicago. Park soon was regarded as the intellectual leader of the Chicago School of Sociology and the most influential figure in determining the direction of American sociology. Park was particularly instrumental in changing the new field of sociology from "do-gooderism" to a more objective social science (Hughes, 1980, p. 73). Chicago was a city of immigrants from European villages, living in urban slum conditions. The empirical studies by Park and his doctoral students were intended to document and provide understanding of these immigrants' social problems. Park insisted that such investigation must attempt to be objective. The proper role of the social researcher, Park felt, was to study and report research results, but not to engage in ameliorating the social problems that were studied. This task should be left to social workers and to other professionals. Park drew on Simmel's concept of the stranger as a model for the objectivity of the social scientist (Raushenbush, 1979, p. 96).

For example, a Chicago sociologist might investigate prostitution, but the scholar's personal abhorrence of this profession should not affect how the research was conducted or the interpretation of the findings (Rogers, 1994, p. 187). Park insisted that his graduate students should not become personally involved in the social reform of social problems, other than in studying these problems objectively so that they could be better understood. Park described Chicago sociology as "a logical scheme for a disinterested investigation" (1922, p. 15).

The emphasis on scientific objectivity by Park, influenced by Simmel, was generally accepted by many American sociologists and by many other social scientists of the day. Prior to Park, many sociologists had come from social work or the ministry and thought mainly of ameliorat-

ing social problems. Park sought to direct sociology toward becoming a science.⁹ In addition, the social sciences at this same time generally took the physical and biological sciences as their model of academic respectability, and this influence led to an emphasis upon objectivity.

The Concept of Social Distance

Park, inspired by Simmel's notion of the stranger and Simmel's related idea of intimacy versus distance in interpersonal relationships (Bogardus, 1959, p. 13), developed the concept of *social distance*, defined as the degree to which an individual perceives a lack of intimacy with individuals who differ in ethnicity, race, religion, occupation, or other variables (Park, 1924; Park, 1950, pp. 256–260). One of Park's doctoral student, Emory S. Bogardus, developed a social distance scale that measured whether a respondent felt closer to Chinese or to Mexicans, for example (Bogardus, 1929, 1933, 1959). Thus a respondent was asked, "Would you marry a Chinese? Would you have Chinese as regular friends? As speaking acquaintances?" (Bogardus, 1933). Then the same series of questions were asked the respondent for Mexicans and other categories. Essentially, the Bogardus social distance scale quantified as a continuous variable the perceived intimacy versus distance of an individual to various other racial or ethnic categories.

The concept of social distance focused scholarly inquiry on social relationships between two or more individuals who were different.¹⁰ This communication between unalikes is the defining characteristic of intercultural communication.

The Concept of Marginal Man

Simmel's concept of the stranger also influenced Park (1928) to conceptualize what he called the "marginal man," an individual who lives in two different worlds, in both of which the individual is a stranger (Park, 1928; Levine & others, 1976). An example, studied by Park, was the first-generation American offspring of European immigrant parents. These marginal men and women typically rejected the European culture and language of their parents, but did not consider themselves to be true Americans. They felt relatively free from the norms of either system, which may be one explanation for their relatively higher crime rates in Chicago. Park stated that the marginal man is

a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two different peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place. (1928)

In addition to migrants, marginal men might be racial hybrids of mixed blood, for example, an Eurasian in Asia, or a cultural hybrid like a Christian convert in Asia or a Europeanized African. One of Park's doctoral

students, Everett V. Stonequist, described various types of marginal men in his book, *The Marginal Man* (1937). Park's concept of the marginal man was later extended to the *sojourner*, an individual who visits another culture for a period of time but who retains his or her original culture (Siu, 1952). The sojourner later became a favorite topic of study by intercultural communication scholars and led to such concepts as the U-curve of adjustment, culture shock, and reentry shock (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999).

Park's intellectual interest in the marginal man stemmed from his perspective that such individuals represented a kind of laboratory for understanding social change: "It is in the mind of the marginal man—where the changes and fusions of culture are going on—that we can best study the processes of civilization and of progress" (1928).

The Concept of Heterophily

Another intellectual descendant of Simmel's stranger, somewhat related to the concept of social distance advanced by Park and by Bogardus, is *heterophily*, defined as communication between two or more individuals who are unlike. The opposite concept, *homophily*, is communication between two or more individuals who are similar (Rogers, 1995). The concepts of homophily and heterophily were developed by Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton (1964) and have been utilized in a number of communication researches (Rogers, 1995). The concepts of homophily-heterophily, and such synonyms as similarity-dissimilarity, segregating-differentiating, and similarity-complementarity have been investigated in organizational communication, small groups, communities, and other systems.¹¹

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1964, p. 21) utilized homophily-heterophily to analyze social network data that they gathered in two housing communities: (1) Crafttown, a project of 700 families in New Jersey, and (2) Hilltown, a biracial project of 800 families in Pennsylvania. Respondents were asked to identify their three closest friends. Homophily was measured as friendships between individuals who were alike in some designated respect, and heterophily as friendships between individuals who differed in some designated respect. So, for instance, a respondent who identified his or her most intimate friends as racially different from himself or herself displayed a high degree of heterophily.¹²

Homophily and heterophily have been measured both subjectively, as the degree to which an individual perceives himself or herself as similar or dissimilar from another person, and, more objectively, as the degree to which two or more individuals are observed to be similar or dissimilar (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Past research has dealt mainly with objective homophily-heterophily. When both have been measured, the re-

sults indicate that they are positively, although not strongly related. Further, subjective homophily is more closely related than is objective homophily to other variables like frequency of communication and interpersonal attraction (Rokeach, 1968, p. 63).

Cosmopolitanism

Another concept in current use by communication scholars that also descended from Simmel's notion of the stranger is *cosmopolitanism*, defined as the degree to which an individual has a relatively high degree of communication outside of the system (Rogers, 1995, p. 274). Cosmopolites provide a system with openness, the degree to which a system exchanges information with its environment (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976, p. 140). The concept of cosmopolitanism was developed by Robert K. Merton (1949, pp. 441–474) in a study of influentials' media exposure in Dover, NJ, called "Rovere," a pseudonym. A national news magazine (*Time*) sponsored Merton's research project in Rovere. It was designed to determine whether or not the readers of *Time* were influential opinion leaders. An initial sample of 86 respondents were asked to name individuals who had influenced them in making a decision. Thirty of the influentials thus identified were then interviewed as to whether they read *Time* and various other media. A first cut at the data analysis indicated that influentials were no more likely to read *Time* magazine than were noninfluentials.

Merton then found that the 30 influentials included individuals with two quite different orientations: locals versus cosmopolitans. For a local influential, "Rovere is essentially his world" (Merton, 1949, p. 477). Locals were wedded to Rovere for life and had lived there for a long period. They identified strongly with the community, were well known by other residents, and mainly read local media. In contrast, cosmopolitans were more mobile, more highly educated, traveled widely, and had friendship networks with individuals outside of the community. Every one of the 14 cosmopolitans in Merton's study read either *The New York Times* or the *New York Herald Tribune*, or both. *Time* magazine readers were especially likely to be cosmopolitans (Merton, 1949, p. 462).

Merton traced his concepts of local and cosmopolitan to Ferdinand Tönnies's (1940) concepts of *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society) and to Simmel, whom Merton called "that man of innumerable seminal ideas" (1949, p. 458). Merton does not specifically cite Simmel's writing about the stranger as the source of his idea of the local/cosmopolite, although he had been exposed to Simmel's concept of the stranger while he was enrolled in doctoral study at Harvard University in the 1930s (Levine, Carter, & Gorman, 1976). Merton also read Park

and Burgess's (1921) *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, which included a translation of Simmel's writing on the stranger. Merton had acquired a personal copy of Simmel's (1908) *Soziologie*, which contained Simmel's concept of the stranger, on a trip to Europe in 1937, and thereafter gave concentrated attention to Simmel's theories in his course at Columbia University on the history of sociological theory (Levine et al., 1976).

Why is the stranger a cosmopolite, oriented outside of the system and with a relatively high degree of communication with others outside of the system? The stranger differs from the other members of the system, perhaps due in part to his or her recency of joining the system. Wood stated: "A stranger who has entered a group for the first time is outside the system of relationships which unite the group" (1934, p. 8). This external orientation frees the stranger from the norms and expectations of the system, and also sets the stranger at a certain social distance from others in the system. Thus the stranger perceives the system in a different light than the host and is freer to consider new ideas, especially those from external sources.

Later scholars changed Merton's noun of "cosmopolitan" to a conceptual variable, "cosmopolitaness," thus converting Merton's ideal types of cosmopolitan and local to a continuous variable (Rogers, 1995, p. 274). The concept of cosmopolitaness has been applied in organizational research, where the individuals high in cosmopolitaness may be called *boundary-spanners* (Thompson, 1967; Janowitz & Delany, 1957). Cosmopolites have been found to be concentrated at the top and at the bottom of many organizations (Rogers & Agarwala-Rogers, 1976, p. 67).

Research on the diffusion of innovations has also made extensive use of the concept of cosmopolitaness (Rogers, 1962, 1995). For example, one of the earliest and most influential diffusion studies was an investigation of the spread of hybrid seed corn among Iowa farmers (Ryan & Gross, 1943). Farmers who were more innovative in adopting the new seed traveled more often to cities like Des Moines. A similar relationship between innovativeness (defined as the degree to which an individual is relatively earlier than others in adopting new ideas) and cosmopolitaness was also found in a study of the diffusion of a new medical drug among doctors (Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1966). More innovative physicians traveled more often to out-of-town medical specialty meetings.

Individuals who travel widely, such as those who sojourn to live for a time in another culture, are of particular interest to intercultural scholars, because they have a high degree of contact with culturally unlike individuals, both while sojourning, and to a certain degree, on their re-entry (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999).

The Field of Intercultural Communication

Georg Simmel provided one conceptual foundation for the field of intercultural communication, defined previously as the exchange of information between individuals who are unlike culturally (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999).

Beginnings of the Field of Intercultural Communication

Edward T. Hall and the staff of the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), in Washington, DC, in the period from 1951 to 1955 established the field of intercultural communication (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). At that time, the United States had emerged as a leading world power, but American diplomats seldom understood the culture, or knew the national language, of the country in which they were posted. U.S. diplomats were relatively ineffective, compared to those of other nations. The FSI was created in 1946 as a unit within the U.S. Department of State to train and retrain American diplomats and technical assistance workers.

At first, Hall and his anthropological and linguistics colleagues in the FSI taught the participants about the anthropological concept of culture and about the specific culture of the nation in which they were to be assigned. The FSI participants also took intensive language classes that were taught by native speakers. This language training was quite successful, but the anthropological training was considered ineffective by the FSI participants. They told Hall that they needed to communicate across cultures, and thus wanted to understand intercultural differences, rather than to study anthropological understandings of the single culture in which they were to work.

So, Hall, in collaboration with George L. Trager, a linguist trained in the Whorf-Sapir tradition of linguistic relativity,¹³ created a new approach that Hall called “intercultural communication.” At the FSI, intercultural communication meant communication between individuals of different national cultures. Hall concluded: “Culture is communication and communication is culture” (1959, p. 186), an interrelationship previously recognized by Simmel (Levine et al., 1976). Hall’s important book, *The Silent Language*, as its name implies, focused on nonverbal communication, and, more broadly, on intercultural communication. Hall’s book was very widely read,¹⁴ and contributed toward the establishment, over the following decade, to the teaching of university courses in intercultural communication.¹⁵ The courses in this new field were taught in departments of communication, rather than in anthropology or linguistics (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1990; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Hall did not cite Simmel’s theory of the stranger in *The Silent Language*, nor in any of his books or other publications dealing with intercultural communication (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Hall credited Benjamin Lee Whorf for his influence on Hall’s conceptualization of intercultural

tural communication (1959, pp. 118–120) and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory for Hall’s investigation of the out-of-awareness aspects of nonverbal communication (Hall, 1959, pp. 59–60; 1992, pp. 241–256).

The Broadening of Intercultural Communication

As teaching and research in intercultural communication developed over the decades, the meaning of “culture” in intercultural communication broadened from Hall’s original conception of national culture to any type of culture or co-culture. Intercultural communication came to mean communication between individuals who differed in important ways. They might differ in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, lifestyle, or in other ways. This broadened definition of the field is reflected in most intercultural communication textbooks today.

A key figure in this broadening of the field was William B. Gudykunst, a professor of communication at California State University, Fullerton. While Gudykunst was studying for his MA degree in sociology, he encountered Simmel’s concept of the stranger, and, some years later, emphasized this concept in his efforts to define the field of intercultural communication. In a 1983 article published in the *International Journal of Intercultural Communication*, a leading scholarly journal in intercultural communication, Gudykunst laid out his basic applications of Simmel’s concept. This perspective was later carried through in a textbook, coauthored with another intercultural communication scholar, Young Yun Kim, at the University of Oklahoma, *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication* (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984/1993/1997). Here and in other writings, Gudykunst argued that the stranger is perceived as unfamiliar by other members of the system, and thus a high degree of uncertainty is involved, as the stranger’s counterpart does not possess adequate personal and other information about the stranger, at least initially. In this sense, the stranger is an individual different from oneself (Sorrells, 1997). This definition is indeed broad, and is close to the concept of heterophily. A stranger spans boundaries through heterophilous communication with others.

Gudykunst and Kim conceptualized communication with a stranger as the key intellectual device to broaden the meaning of intercultural communication (1997, p. 49). The cultural differences could involve national culture, or some other type of culture, such as organizational culture or the culture of the deaf. So Gudykunst and Kim utilized the concept of the stranger as a unifying theoretical theme for the study of intercultural communication. Gudykunst’s argument that intercultural communication should be conceptually based on the notion of communication with a stranger has been accepted by some other intercultural communication scholars, in both their textbooks (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999) and other publications (Sorrells, 1997). The Gudykunst and Kim

textbook was the sixth most-highly cited book in the *Intercultural Journal of Intercultural Relations* from 1983 to 1996 (Hart, 1998). Citations to Simmel's concept of the stranger, however, are practically nonexistent in the contemporary literature in intercultural communication.

Paths Not Taken

How would the field of intercultural communication be different today if it recognized more clearly its intellectual connections to Simmel's concept of the stranger? Simmel called attention to the degree of perceived distance between two or more individuals as a fundamental dimension in understanding human behavior. The stranger was a kind of ideal type for Simmel, representing communication between distanced people. If intercultural communication scholars traced their field more directly to Simmel rather than to the scholarship of Edward T. Hall, they might have been earlier in conceptualizing the distinctive quality of intercultural communication as centering on information exchange between distanced individuals who are usually unlike (heterophilous) in important ways that affect their communication. The more limited, original perspective of intercultural communication as communication between people of different national cultures stemmed from the Foreign Service Institute's applied objective of training American diplomats for international assignments. This more constricted scope of intercultural communication is represented in Hall's *The Silent Language* (1959).

If intercultural communication scholars recognized their intellectual debt to Simmel more fully, perhaps they would have focused more closely on the uncertainty¹⁶ that usually is involved in intercultural communication (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). How do individuals reduce this uncertainty by means of communication with relative strangers (who are relatively difficult to communicate with)? How does one begin a conversation with a stranger who is completely unknown? What role does empathy, weak network links (Granovetter, 1973), and other communication concepts play in understanding communication with strangers? These research questions, and other scholarly paths not taken, might have been explored if intercultural communication scholars had more closely understood their academic ancestry. "The notion of the stranger is a powerful and relevant concept for the field of intercultural communication" (Sorrells, 1997).

Conclusions

The present essay traced the intellectual descendants of Georg Simmel's concept of the stranger from its original publication in German in 1908, through its English translations in 1921 by Park and Burgess (Simmel, 1921) and in 1950 by Wolff (Simmel, 1950), into contemporary applications. Simmel defined the stranger as an individual who is a member of

a system, but who is not strongly attached to the system. This relative freedom from the norms of the system allows the stranger to enjoy certain unique qualities: He or she may be able to view the system from a different (and perhaps more objective) perspective, which might be appropriate for social scientific investigations of the system, maintained Robert E. Park.

Simmel's followers spun off four concepts related to Simmel's stranger: social distance, the marginal man, heterophily, and cosmopolitanism. Social distance is the degree to which an individual perceives a lack of intimacy with individuals different in ethnicity, race, religion, occupation, or other variables. Marginal man is an individual who lives in two different worlds, in both of which the individual is a stranger. Heterophily is the degree to which two or more individuals who interact are unlike. Cosmopolitanism is the degree to which an individual has a relatively high degree of communication outside of the system.

Simmel's original concept of the stranger, and the four concepts derived from it, are all relational in nature. They deal with the interpersonal relationships of the individual to other individuals or to the system of which the individual is a part, or both. Fundamental to Simmel's general theoretical perspective were the strengths and weaknesses of intimate versus distant relationships, between both the individual and others and the individual and the system.

Although it has not been widely appreciated, Simmel was, in an intellectual sense, one forefather of intercultural communication.

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Author

¹ One notable exception to the general lack of recognition of Simmel by communication scholars is the Gudykunst and Kim (1984/1992/1997) textbook in intercultural communication entitled *Communicating with Strangers*, which quoted from Simmel's (1950) original description of the stranger and which utilizes the stranger as its main perspective for explaining intercultural communication. A similar reference to Simmel's stranger as a basic idea in understanding intercultural communication is provided by Gudykunst (1983, 1993).

² Simmel's theoretical perspective was one of the intellectual bases for the symbolic interactionist viewpoint developed by the Chicago School of Sociology during 1915–1935 (Rogers, 1994, p. 170).

³ This dimension of social distance that Simmel saw as fundamental to his conception of human communication was the root notion for his concept of the stranger and thus was central to the concepts of social distance, the marginal man, cosmopolitanism, and homophily-heterophily developed later by other scholars. Simmel did not specify exactly how to measure social distance (Simmel

Notes

was mainly a theoretician, unconcerned with empirical study). Perhaps the operational vagueness of Simmel's concept encouraged the variety of its intellectual descendants.

⁴ Simmel's original writing about the concept of the stranger first appeared in German in 1908 on pages 685–691 of his *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. This work was translated by Park and Burgess (Simmel, 1921, pp. 322–327) and Wolff (1950, pp. 402–408).

⁵ Thus, a stranger is characterized by a low degree of *cohesion*, defined by social psychologists as the degree to which an individual fulfills the role expectations of a system (Cartwright & Zander, 1953/1968).

⁶ Stranger communities exist, in addition to stranger individuals. Examples are Jews in America, Koreans in Los Angeles, and Indians in Tanzania. Both strangers and stranger communities have been found to be particularly entrepreneurial because of the selectivity of who migrates and of the migrants' general nonconformity to the norms of the system.

⁷ A review of various literary works concerning the stranger is provided by Sorrells (1997).

⁸ Small had been a fellow student with Simmel at the University of Berlin in 1880, and they maintained a close collegial relationship thereafter (Christakes, 1978).

⁹ The development of the Chicago School of Sociology and its emphasis upon objectivity are documented in over 700 publications, which are summarized by Rogers (1994, pp. 137–202).

¹⁰ By 1959, 30 years after the original publication of his social distance scale, Bogardus (1959, pp. 97–101) cited 57 articles and books with "social distance" in their title.

¹¹ Many of these studies are summarized by Rogers and Bhowmik (1970).

¹² Lazarsfeld and Merton (1964, p. 63) cited Georg Simmel (1950) and Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess (1921), along with other scholars, as the source of their conception of homophily-heterophily. Merton indicated (in a personal communication cited in Levine et al., 1976, p. 819) that his interest in Simmel's theories originated in Talcott Parson's doctoral course in sociological theory at Harvard University in the early 1930s and in reading the selections by Simmel in Park and Burgess's sociology textbook.

¹³ Trager had been a colleague of Benjamin Lee Whorf and Edward Sapir at Yale University from 1936 to 1938, when the perspective of *linguistic relativity*, defined as the degree to which language influences human thought and meanings, was developed (Carroll, 1940/1956, pp. 1–34).

¹⁴ Some 505,000 copies of *The Silent Language* were sold from 1961 to 1969 (letter to Edward T. Hall from June Layton at his publisher, dated March 19, 1969, E. T. Hall Papers, Box 41, Folder 4, Special Collections, University of Arizona Library).

¹⁵ Professor Mitchell Hammer, a professor at American University, recalls that when he was enrolled in doctoral study of intercultural communication at the University of Minnesota in the late 1970s, "*The Silent Language* was our Bible" (personal communication, March 20, 1998).

¹⁶ *Uncertainty* is an individual's inability to predict or to understand some situation because of a lack of information about alternatives.

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