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Source: *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 36, No. 2/3, Special Double Issue: Cultural Brokerage: Forms of Intellectual Practice in Society (May - Dec., 1999), pp. 206-215

Published by: [Indiana University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814725>

Accessed: 24/02/2015 08:45

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*Klaus and Juliana Roth*

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS APPLIED  
ETHNOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

*Intercultural communication* is usually defined as any direct communicative interaction between individuals or groups of individuals belonging to different cultures. In other words, the term denotes interpersonal communication between “strangers” on the micro-level of face-to-face interaction. In a wider sense, however, the term is also but less frequently used to refer to direct or indirect interactions or contacts between ethnic groups, nations or cultures, thus denoting culture contact and cultural exchange on the meso- or macro-level. Whatever the definition and the level of analysis, there is general agreement that *culture* and *communication* as “symbolic exchanges of meanings” are very closely related (Hall 1959; Leach 1976).

The question we want to address is whether *Intercultural Communication* as an academic discipline focusing on the application of theoretical knowledge to social practice should be a matter of concern for the ethnological disciplines.<sup>1</sup> More often than ever before in history, individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact with each other on a daily basis, not only as a result of the emergence of multicultural and multinational states and the end of the East-West divide, but mostly as a result of worldwide migrations, economic and political globalization, and mass tourism. There can be no denying that the study of the social consequences of this increased culture contact by the ethnological disciplines is necessary; the question is whether they should go beyond pure research and get involved in the application of their research findings.

In Europe and the U.S.A., the field of Intercultural Communication is presently taken care of by several disciplines. In the U.S.A., it is mostly located in Speech Communication (Gudykunst and Kim 1984; Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey 1988), whereas in Europe it is often part of Pragmatic Linguistics and foreign language teaching. Both in the U.S.A. and in Europe, Cross-Cultural Psychology and Social Psychology are actively involved in Intercultural Communication (Brislin 1993; Hofstede 1980, 1993; Thomas 1991); this interest also extends to such practice-oriented disciplines as Education, Business Administration (“*Intercultural Management*,” cf. Adler [1986]1991), Law, and Medicine, which all face problems arising from increased intercultural contact. From yet another angle, the field has been approached by scholars of Regional Studies in an attempt to extend

*Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 36, Nos. 2/3, 1999  
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their curriculum of teaching language, history, and topography to incorporate the dimension of everyday culture.

The variety of these approaches and vested interests obscures the fact that Cultural Anthropology actually constituted Intercultural Communication as an academic discipline and contributed heavily to its theoretical and methodological foundations. It was as early as the 1950s that the cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed the field out of his own experience and from the anthropological theories of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, which he combined with theories of descriptive linguistics (Edward Sapir, Benjamin L. Whorf), sociology (Georg Simmel), ethology, and psychoanalysis (Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm). All this was formulated in his groundbreaking 1959 book *The Silent Language*, which is rightly considered the founding document of Intercultural Communication (see Rogers 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Other anthropologists such as Clyde and Florence Kluckhohn (C. Kluckhohn and Murray 1948; F. Kluckhohn and Strodbeck 1961) also contributed to the theoretical foundations of the new discipline, and linguistic anthropologists such as Dell Hymes and John Gumperz explored the relationship between language and culture. Likewise, American and European folklorists and ethnologists made advances in the "Ethnography of Speaking" (Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Abrahams 1970, 1974) and in non-verbal communication (Niederer 1975, 1976; Gyr 1994); they presented numerous studies of migratory folk tales and proverbs, of ethnic slurs (Dundes 1975) and stereotypes (Bausinger 1988; Gerndt 1988), of folk ideas (Dundes 1971) and mentalities (Daun 1996), studies of emigration, expulsion, work migration and culture contact (Greverus et al. 1988), of interethnic relations (Schenk 1988; Weber-Kellermann 1967; Volbrachtoová 1988; Georges and Jones 1995) and international tourism (Bausinger 1991), nation-building and national identity (Löfgren 1989; Ehn, Frykman, and Löfgren 1993), and other fields which are directly or indirectly relevant for Intercultural Communication. In the 1970s, Roger Abrahams, Richard Bauman, Judith Irvine, Susan Philips, and others were actively involved in the East Texas Dialect Project at the Center of Applied Linguistics of the University of Texas, Austin, which aimed at developing guidelines and textbooks for teaching and coaching in multiethnic contexts in the U.S.A.

It has yet to be elucidated why the ethnological disciplines did not continue to expand these advances in Intercultural Communication in a systematic way rather than leave the field to other disciplines for almost two decades. Several reasons prompted the withdrawal of cultural anthropology. According to Everett M. Rogers, one of them is to be found in the person of Edward Hall himself, who did not incorporate Intercultural

Communication in his own academic teaching, never institutionalized it or established a school, and never actively promoted it as a new discipline; in addition, his approach was criticized by cultural anthropologists as being too biological and deterministic and as viewing man as a social animal. It seems unlikely, though, that the attitudes and actions of one person alone can explain this withdrawal. It is more likely that there are other reasons. One of them could be the negative attitude of many cultural anthropologists and folklorists of the 1970s toward the *application* of ethnological knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Later, as a result of constructivism, symbolic interactionism, and the “writing culture” debate, it was the critique of the very concepts of “culture” and “ethnicity” that worked against an involvement in Intercultural Communication. Focusing on culture and cultural differences was considered to be an expression of “culturalism” (cf. Kaschuba 1995b). As for the American folklorists, the reason could be their experience with the application of ethnological knowledge to social practice: the Texas project mentioned above concentrated on the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of ethnic and racial groups in the U.S.A. and on their sensitive interrelations in a very troubled period of growing ethnic self-awareness and tensions.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last twenty-five years, scholars in speech communication, pragmatic linguistics, psychology, and education have produced a tremendous amount of research and developed valuable theories and methods for Intercultural Communication, not to mention the large number of textbooks and other publications. While these achievements are fully acknowledged, the absence of the ethnological disciplines has made itself felt more and more. The approaches to Intercultural Communication by the above-mentioned disciplines are determined by their disciplinary interests, theories, and methodologies. Speech Communication and Pragmatic Linguistics focus almost exclusively on language, discourse, and discourse strategies, assuming that (as a linguist put it at a conference) “everything is in the language”; psychology stresses the role of perception, identity, the individual experience of *otherness*, and culture shock, while education focuses on the concrete problems in the multicultural classroom. The regional studies approach is limited by its focus on one region or culture.

In contrast, placing the broad concept of “culture” in the center of their approach, the ethnological disciplines have developed concepts, theories, and methods that are the most comprehensive and complex ones for the study of intercultural communication. They can deal with all aspects of intercultural interactions, i.e., both with their *micro-contexts* and their *macro-contexts*, with their *synchronic* and their *diachronic* dimensions, with their *verbal* and their *nonverbal* dimensions, with the *culture brought in* and the *culture brought about*, and with *culture-general* and *culture-specific* approaches to them. Above all, the *ethnographic method* has proven to be a powerful tool for research and for teaching. At an international conference of inter-

culturalists (in Fullerton, California) in 1998, participants deplored the absence of the ethnological sciences, particularly given the fact that ethnological concepts, theories, and methods are regularly employed by non-ethnologists, but often in a rather mechanical way.

The ethnological disciplines have made important contributions to Intercultural Communication and should therefore expand their activities in this field to complement the other disciplines. In 1989, this rationale inspired a joint project of *Volkskunde* (Folklore/European Ethnology) and *Völkerkunde* (Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology) at Munich University to develop an entire curriculum for teaching Intercultural Communication to university students; in 1993, the project was joined by pragmatic linguists of German as a foreign language. As of 1996, Intercultural Communication is an officially recognized discipline (as a minor subject) with a professorship and some 500 students from a great variety of disciplines. Dissertations and conference proceedings are published in the series "Munich Contributions to Intercultural Communication."

Ten years of experience have demonstrated that the ethnological disciplines can indeed contribute immensely to research and teaching of Intercultural Communication. Their contribution consists of *theories* that have become essential for Intercultural Communication (e.g., cognitive anthropology) or approaches that can be applied to it; basic *concepts* such as "culture," "enculturation," "acculturation," "ethnicity," "cultural identity," "culture change," "context," "emic/etic perspective," etc., which have meanwhile become part of the basic terminology of Intercultural Communication; a highly developed *methodology*, mainly the ethnographic method of participant observation, narrative interviews, and oral history with its focus on empathy, change of perspective (emic/etic), and reflection which is pivotal to the ethnological approach to Intercultural Communication; and finally, the established *fields of study* and *experience* as well as the accumulated knowledge of the ethnological disciplines about the cultural variation of behaviors, customs and rituals, of folk narratives and material culture, of values and norms, beliefs and attitudes, folk ideas and world views (cf. Dundes 1971). Furthermore, folklorists and European ethnologists have much experience with studying their "own" culture or nation, while cultural anthropologists and ethnologists usually study "other," "exotic" cultures. For Intercultural Communication, both perspectives on culture are equally relevant, but in view of the increased culture contact and the blurring of boundaries between "us" and "them," they have to be regarded as complementary rather than exclusive of each other. As a consequence, the ethnological disciplines should cooperate to study intercultural interactions as well as the perceptions and stereotypes guiding them. They have to be aware of the challenges of a world in which the "own" and the "other" are no longer neatly separated, if they ever were.

The field of Intercultural Communication is confronted with many epistemological and theoretical as well as practical and didactic problems which can be indicated only briefly. Many of them can be described in terms of dichotomies or oppositions. First is the question whether modern societies will develop in the direction of *cultural homogeneity* ("world culture," "McDonaldization") or of *cultural diversity*, universalism or cultural differentiation, globalization or regionalization or even cultural fundamentalism.

Second, Intercultural Communication has to define its position between the extreme views of culture and ethnicity as *primordial* or merely *instrumental*, essential or random constructs, between regarding ethnic or national cultures as "natural" or as skillful constructions of elites ("inventions of tradition"). In other words, Intercultural Communication has to define its place somewhere in the middle between the Scylla of *essentialism* (and culturalism) and the Charybdis of postmodern *voluntarism* (cf. Eriksen 1993).

Third, in its theoretical approach to teaching, Intercultural Communication has to determine its position between the *cognitive anthropology* of Ward Goodenough, which departs from the assumption that cultures (like languages) have a "grammar," and *symbolic interactionism* (Clifford Geertz); while the first has proven to be a useful basis for teaching, the application of the latter appears to be more difficult because of its focus on the interpretation of symbolic creations and the complex dynamics of elusive personal interactions at the expense of environmental factors (cf. Schweitzer 1999:11f.). The approach also pays less attention to the "culture brought in" by the interaction partners, but experience has shown that particularly in stressful intercultural encounters people usually fall back on stereotypical behaviors and the reliable "basics" of their culture.

From this follows that, fourth, Intercultural Communication has to pay equal attention to the *culture brought in* by the participants of an interaction and to the *culture brought about* in the actual process of interaction, as John Gumperz phrased it, i.e., between the relatively stable and collective "cultural baggage" everyone has acquired in the process of enculturation and the actual communicative interactions, the "intercultural performances" and their dynamic micro-contexts and situational factors. In other words, both the cultural background and individual disposition of the actors and the actual communicative process have to receive attention. The ethnological disciplines have a strong tradition of looking at the historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts of interactions and performances, and at the relevant power relations. It is particularly the contextual and the communications approach in American folklore and cultural anthropology, on the one hand, and the interethnic relations and migration studies approach in German *Volkskunde*, on the other hand, that benefit Intercultural Communication.

Fifth, due to the experience and the expertise of the ethnological disciplines, and their complementarity to pragmatic linguistics, the focus of the ethnological approach to Intercultural Communication is more on the *non-verbal* parts of communication, i.e., on the actions, behaviors, and artifacts as well as on the underlying perceptions and assumptions, values and norms, rather than on the *verbal* parts of communication.

Sixth, Intercultural Communication has arisen out of the needs of modern societies and, from its beginnings, has always had a strong orientation toward social practice. As a consequence, it focuses not only on *research*, but also on the *application* of its findings, i.e., the application of knowledge about culture and communication to teaching and practice. Although there are many different fields of practice and application, it has become habitual to differentiate between two major frames, the *domestic* and the *international*. Even if it is not always possible to separate them clearly, they have proven to be relevantly different contexts for intercultural interactions. In the *domestic* arena of homogeneous nation-states, intercultural communication is limited to small numbers of experts, whereas in the historical multinational states (such as the Habsburg or the Ottoman Empires), ethnic groups and individuals developed social habits and everyday skills of interethnic coexistence and intercultural communication. Today, such habits and skills are needed in modern multicultural countries, where intercultural interactions occur on an everyday basis at the workplace, in schools and hospitals, in courts of law and in other institutions. They are needed much more, however, in *international* interactions, i.e., in worldwide communication, business, politics, diplomacy, international organizations, development aid, technology transfer, tourism, sports, cultural exchange, and other fields. For Intercultural Communication, it is of great importance that cultural difference is much more readily assumed and accepted in the international than in the domestic arena, even in multicultural countries.

Another important difference in the frames of intercultural interactions is that between goal-oriented organizations or institutions and private or public life in multicultural societies, where cultural difference is often considered a necessary evil. Empirical experience shows that making intercultural relations work and solving cross-cultural problems is much easier in organizational contexts (Moosmüller 1998:89).

The application of research findings to *intercultural learning* is based on the premise that knowledge about other cultures and about communicating across cultural boundaries can be taught and learned. That this is indeed possible is an observation that Edward Hall made already in the 1950s: just as we learn our own culture in the process of enculturation, we are also able to learn other cultures in adult life, although in a different manner. However, because cultures are extremely complex and dynamic



systems, understanding and mastering them demand a lot of motivation and many years of intense cognitive and experiential learning from the adult learner. Practical experience has shown, though, and globalization and the multicultural reality of (post)modern societies demand, that the acquisition of “perfect” knowledge of entire cultures is neither possible nor necessary. Consequently, intercultural learning does not aim at knowing entire cultures. Instead, it is a process of acquiring theme-oriented and goal-oriented knowledge of relevant areas of given cultures and of ways of recognizing, understanding, and handling cultural differences and of using this knowledge for acting adequately in intercultural situations. In other words, it tries to develop a degree of *intercultural competence*, i.e., a variety of social and communicative competence.

There is agreement in the ethnological sciences that “the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values” (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952:181). Accordingly, the ethnological approach to Intercultural Communication emphasizes the non-verbal and invisible side of culture, i.e., behaviors, ideas, values, and assumptions. On the basis of this *value-centered approach*, some scholars have discovered a (limited) number of value orientations or *culture dimensions* in which cultures display variations between each other and, of course, within themselves (Kluckhohn 1961; Hall 1959, [1966] 1969; Hofstede 1980).

Culture as a system of daily orientation, perception, and interpretation of reality involves not only the mind but the person as a whole. Accordingly, intercultural learning first addresses the *cognitive* side of the learner, but it must also address the *affective-emotional* experience of the self and of otherness, and it aims, finally, at the *behavior* of the learner. All these are aspects that concern the relationship of the individual to *all* other cultures, to cultural otherness in general. Therefore the ethnological approach to Intercultural Communication and to intercultural learning is of necessity *culture general*, not *culture specific*.

The Munich curriculum of intercultural learning for university students is based on these premises. It has five major goals and proceeds in five steps (cf. J. Roth 1996):

1. The backbone of teaching is a solid basis of theoretical knowledge about culture and communication; this includes knowledge about the relationship between culture and behavior and between culture and language, about value orientations (culture dimensions) and their variation, and about perception, attribution, and stereotyping.
2. Methodology is of greatest importance. The students are taught the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing, of empathy and change of perspective. With the help of these methods they learn to make pertinent observations and ask relevant questions in order to



understand intercultural situations. In principle, they are taught “to learn how to learn,” i.e., how to observe, to describe, and to interpret information (J. Roth 1996:264), instead of learning ready-made rules, “cultural standards,” or tool kits of cultural “do’s and don’ts.”

3. Generating *cultural self-awareness*, i.e., making the students sensitive to their own culture and the extent to which they are influenced by it is a difficult but indispensable step. It involves the students’ identity and a reflection on themselves and their behavior. Our experience shows, however, that cognitive intercultural learning produces much better results if the students are addressed and involved as cultural personalities and can relate their theoretical knowledge to their everyday experience (J. Roth 1996:260).

4. Generating *cultural awareness*, i.e., an awareness of cultural difference, of “otherness” and “alienness,” is a prerequisite for intercultural learning. Making learners acquainted with, and used to, the “signs of culture,” sensitizing them to the behavioral consequences of variations in value orientations and enabling them to “read” them, and making them tolerate ambiguity and develop flexibility—these are goals that are not easy to achieve. The students have to learn to detect those variations in values that are relevant for actual misunderstandings, to organize and evaluate their impressions, and to search for explanations and—in conflict situations—for solutions or alternatives.

5. The *application of theoretical knowledge* either to intercultural research or to social practice is the final goal of the curriculum. The acquisition of ways and means of analyzing intercultural situations and of adequately handling differences or mediating conflicts is achieved in the classroom through the application of the general skills to specific cultural interfaces and to real contexts, for example to bicultural marriages (Waldis 1998), to institutions such as schools or courts of law, or to organizations such as companies with a multinational work-force (Kartari 1997; Moosmüller 1997).

Social anthropology (or ethnology) developed as a colonial discipline that studied colonized “primitive” peoples, while folklore (and ethnography) grew as a “discipline of one’s own people” in the service of the emerging nation-states. In view of this history of subordination of ethnographic knowledge to the goals of colonial rulers and nationalist or socialist states, it is understandable that ethnologists are reluctant to make yet another attempt to apply their knowledge. However, past misuses should not preclude necessary applications, but should lead to more care and circumspection. The social problems of (post)modern societies concern the ethnological disciplines in a very direct way. On the one hand, there is a growth of ethnic self-awareness and a “culturalization” of social and political conflicts, of new nationalism and regionalism (cf. Lindner 1994; Kaschuba 1995b). On the other hand, globalization has resulted in a

dramatic increase in culture contacts. To an unprecedented degree, millions of people are expected to manage cultural diversity in everyday life, mostly without being prepared for it. In other words, cultural difference has become a major social problem.

But neither are the relevant disciplines prepared to contribute to the necessary “reconciliation of differences” (Adorno 1951:130). On the contrary, as Rolf Lindner (1997) recently deplored, ethnologists, folklorists, and cultural anthropologists appear to have abandoned the concept and field of “culture” at a time when social, political, and economic reality is in growing need of the concept—and of a discipline taking care of it; Werner Schiffauer (1996) even noted an “angst of the difference,” a disturbing tendency among cultural anthropologists (resulting from constructivist ideas and political considerations) to deemphasize alterity and Otherness.

The use and application of ethnological knowledge to social practice thus appear to be necessary, but in view of past experience, the *ethical* implications of this kind of research and cultural management have to be addressed very openly (cf. Jones 1985; Amborn 1993). The ethical standards for the application of ethnological knowledge must be defined in accordance with the goals and tasks of the discipline in modern society. Ethnological knowledge should be used to facilitate interethnic coexistence, to contribute to better understanding between individuals and peoples belonging to different cultures, and to develop strategies for managing cultural diversity. Accordingly, the discussion of the ethics of intercultural learning is an important aspect in the Munich curriculum. Building upon the analysis of systems of values and norms in given cultures and the problem of particularistic vs. universal ethics and using existing professional *Codes of Ethics* (cf. Fluehr-Labban 1991), the curriculum addresses the questions of cultural relativism vs. universalism and of ethics in cross-cultural research, in intercultural learning in the classroom and in training, and in the practical application of cultural knowledge. In view of the fact that intercultural interactions almost always occur in hierarchical or power relations, the dangers of the misuse of cultural knowledge receive special attention.

Let us conclude by saying that ethnology and folklore as disciplines that focus on culture should contribute their expert knowledge to easing the social consequences of globalization and increased culture contact. More than other disciplines, they can take into account both the complex socio-cultural contexts and the historical conditions of intercultural interactions. Ten years of experience with teaching Intercultural Communication to students at Munich University have produced ample evidence of the positive uses to which this knowledge can be put. Incorporating Intercultural Communication in the discipline s’ domains of research, teaching, and application will certainly benefit both society and our disciplines.

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## NOTES

1. In this paper the term “ethnological disciplines” is used to refer to the disciplines of Folklore, Ethnography, Ethnology, Cultural Anthropology, and Social Anthropology; we are well aware of the differences between them, but want to stress their commonalities vis-à-vis the other disciplines engaged in Intercultural Communication.

2. Cf. Edward T. Hall’s 1968 article on “Proxemics” and its critical discussion by seventeen anthropologists.

3. Michael Owen Jones (1985:235) critically comments on Richard Dorson’s statement that “it is no business of the folklorist to engage in social reform,” which Dorson made in the special issue of *Folklore Forum* entitled *Papers on Applied Folklore* (1971). Jones strongly argues in favor of interventionism and application in the example of organizational culture.

4. *Ed. Note:* Klaus and Juliana Roth respond here in writing to the vigorous discussion following the oral presentation of this paper. Roger Abrahams, while clarifying that “intercultural communication” as a field never flourished, did point to the work of the East Texas Project of the 1970s, designed by Américo Paredes, Richard Bauman, and himself. Fieldwork-based programs were designed to enhance the education of minorities. Abrahams also pointed out that the folklore center at the University of Texas always contained the word “intercultural” in its title and considered its mission one of working between cultures.

*Regina Bendix with Elliott Oring*THE COMPROMISES OF APPLYING THEORIES IN THE MAKING:  
RESPONSE TO KLAUS ROTH’S ORALLY DELIVERED PAPER

Elliott Oring, who unfortunately was not able to join the conference, provided a stimulating response abstract that I in turn used as the basis for a more impromptu reaction to Klaus Roth’s paper.<sup>1</sup> I will elaborate on three points.

Roth asks why Edward Hall’s example was not followed more vigorously at the time. I would argue that the failure to take up Hall’s lead was due not only to the provocation and singularity of his work, but also to the fact that the superficial quality of Hall’s writing created discomfort. Many of Hall’s examples have actually entered public discourse. For instance, the proxemic issue in encounters between Latin and Nordic individuals makes for graphic illustration beyond the classroom, and many children know about the difference in eating noises and what they mean in China and the U.S.A. I would describe Hall’s *Silent Language* (1959) as an early example of essentializing culture in the interest of brokering ethnological knowledge. As Oring pointed out for us, the text was considered appropriate for an introductory course in cultural anthropology, but it did not constitute a systematic program to sensitize populations toward intercultural communication.