

The Fascination of Cultural Hermeneutics: The Art of Understanding

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Abstract

In this article the idea of a contextual communication on the basis of a dialogical hermeneutics of cultures is introduced. To work contextually means to be open to the fact that different traditions appear on a scene with immanent terminologies, issues, and solutions as equal discursive contributions from their individual perspective.

Key words: Culture, Contextual Communication, Dialogue, Hermeneutics, Tolerance, Geography of Thought.

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Basic Thoughts

The idea of the hermeneutics of cultures allows me to take up a general concept, which I have been tracing for a long time, and at the same time marks of crossing and collision points of an intercultural thinking. The essence of this model means transcultural, e.g. cross-cultural thinking and intercultural action upon maintenance of one's own religious and cultural identity.

Starting from the question that what a culture basically implies, different cultural theories shall be discussed and their instant impact in an intercultural dialogue can be outlined. Based on the dynamic term of culture, I will introduce my approach to communication which comprises seven "correlative terms" which be briefly sketched. Ensuing this introduction, a discussion on the obstacles of dialogues will take place. These are the exclusivity of the claim of truth and absoluteness, that is the claim of an inherent logic and the category of a negative power. In conclusion the concept of a refusing critical approval is mentioned.

What does culture mean and who is culture for?

Culture is the sum of human products by which a human being identifies himself with and differentiates himself from the other. It is discussed as a process of civilization, a human product, a political concept or a fabric of symbol systems, like a social order or as a result of diverse adaptive performances of people or as the substance of the people. Culture is also regarded as an ensemble of texts or memory of social systems, as a bundle of techniques and daily practices especially as spheres of experiences or as infinite phenomena with specific characters.

Culture is not an absolute term but an intrinsically manifold framework with an influential power that connects human beings irrespective of their origin and skin color. The influential power of culture can be found in collectivizing terms such as "European culture", "Oriental culture", "Asian culture" to name a few; and can also be seen in a more specifying context as in the terms "Jewish", "Christian" or "Islamic" culture. Again within these latter terms we speak of a Catholic or Protestant culture, or a Sunni or Shiite culture. Cultural predispositions therefore form the homeland. Taking these varieties into consideration is essential for the success of communication between people.

As we can see, culture embraces our aspects of life, our moral values and norms as well as our beliefs, our worldviews and our languages, in short, it constitutes our identity. Cultures have an impact on our social surrounding and define what we regard as good and bad. In the Qur'an, to take a single example, a human being is explicitly considered as a thinking or a culture-creating being: *"And of His signs is your sleep by night and day and your*

seeking of His bounty. Indeed in that are signs for a people who listen". Language metaphorically stands for culture and color stands for the people who are connected in spite of their diversity. In this respect "every child", in the sense of a prophet, is born in his natural constitution or Fitra (Ghazali, pp. 1058-1111). It is the parents who make their child a Jew, Christian or so on. Ghazali clearly saw that upbringing and education differs from culture to culture. It provides a human being with orientation, security and confidence.

Models of Culture transformation in short

If we look at the existing theories of culture, the cultural image reaches from closed units to formations with open borders. I would like to divide these into seven models which we can observe in science, politics, and society. They are intellectualistic, symbolic-structural, multi, trans, and intercultural as well as standard-giving and closed transformation models that complement, reject or even fight each other:

1. The intellectualistic model is separated from its reference "on entire aspects of life" or the whole phenomena of life and mainly relates to intellectual activities in the form of a "philosophers circle".
2. The symbolic-structural model includes a concept in which the stakeholders identify the meaning of their actions with symbolic orders and limit the meaning of these actions into certain structures. This approach considers culture as a conglomerate of sense systems, which are understood in symbolic orders.
3. The multicultural model knows different orientations of the concept of culture from openness to closeness. Its extreme form assumes cultures in the homogeneous nature as "separate units" or "closed systems". According to this model, cultures coexist or are alien to each other.
4. The transcultural model assumes a total boundlessness of cultures. This model describes itself as a world culture that substitutes regional cultures.
5. The normative model is a concept that judges and classifies according to fixed rules. It favors a certain life plan which mostly claims a universality in an absolutizing manner.
6. The closed model is a regionalizing and nationalizing concept, which emphasizes a specific lifestyle of a collective. Cultures here are understood as marbles that collide without having an inner connection with each other.
7. The intercultural model conceives the concept of "culture" as an open and dynamically changing sense and orientation system. It embodies an open overlapping process and a process of negotiation. Thereby, this model pleads for security and acceptance of cultural differences.

As we can see, the intellectualistic and symbolic-structural models of culture refer more or less to a theoretical engagement with cultures and their



inner meaning. Theoretical assumptions are made and solutions are formulated. Such models contribute less to a practical exchange within the cultures and between them. The same also applies to the multi and transcultural models. While the former understands all cultures in a closed circle or total Multi-Kulti i.e. "everything is equal and right", the latter regards cultures as boundless spheres. This approach is homogenizing and assumes a unified culture as "world culture".

The normative and closed theories of culture are especially problematic because they induce a communication break or lead to such. I would therefore like to illustrate this problem with the theories of Norbert Elias (1897-1990) and Samuel P. Huntington (1927-2008).

In his civilization theory Norbert Elias exclusively assumes an occidentally "civilized" behavior and regards the occident inherent of a leader's function from the occidental society - as a form of elite - today spread "Elias writes" be it through the population of occidentals, be it through the assimilation of the elite of other nations or peoples, occidental "civilized" behaviors over vast areas beyond the West, as formerly in the occident itself, from this or the mentioned elite certain courtly or trading centers behavioral models had spread (Elias, 1978).

According to him, The civilizing competitive struggle of western nations form the "global royal court" of a world society, to which only the elite of other societies "as a lowly, advancing class" has access. To Elias, the Oriental and African societal groups approach the "occidental standards of behavior" ¹. The upper class of these people represents only an advancing lower class compared to the occidental upper class.

Elias approach is a prototype of a wide spread classification in the West, according to which the Globe must be divided into a first, second and third world. The Third World is subordinate to the first and second world, e.g. subordinate to Northamerica and Europe. The cultural circle drawing of Elias also corresponds to the closed culture term of Samuel P. Huntington. To him, cultures are monads that together are alien. Huntington undeterredly speaks of a "clash of civilizations". According to this assumption, the world has entered into a new era of culture struggle after the East-West conflict. Huntington divides the momentary world in two camps, into the "West" and the "Rest" of the world. The western countries are attributed with great political ideas like nationalism, socialism or democracy, all religions however evolved in non-Western cultures (Huntington & Samuel, 1997).

Huntington assumes cultures as circles especially marked out units and states with which methods the West rules the world: "The West did not conquer the world through the superiority of his ideas or the values of his religion, but rather by his superiority in the practice of organized violence.

1. Ibid, S. 348.



Westerners often forget this fact; however, the Non-Westerner never forgets it. This statement clarifies that in reality there is a "struggle between ideologies", a battle of political influence and economic interest and therefore eventually about world power. Huntington's culture model and Elia's theory of civilization include chauvinistic features which cannot contribute to a real understanding.

The unfathomable human being and the process of communication

These examples make clear that the term culture is constitutive to human encounters in all areas. Attempts of reconciliation when cultural predispositions are not taken into consideration are doomed to failure because human beings are not robots that can be programmed or reprogrammed and only its technique is able to make the device function as it should. This isomorphism is not applicable to the communication between human beings. The reason is that human beings are neither computers nor washing machines. Every individual possesses his own cognitive map, a unique repertoire of internal constructions of his reality. We may assume that social, political, cultural or religious conflicts are construed and developed in the encounter of diverging interpretations of reality or individuals, which have far-reaching consequences for the social matrix and also for the communication process. When we look for a real communication, we need new methods and competences that are also appropriate to a situation and context which facilitate our encounters, our academic and political discourses (Yousefi, 210). The understanding of right and wrong or level of tolerance and integration is expressed through every human being differently. Cultures are undoubtedly open and dynamically changing with orientation systems having a certain degree of structural diversity, whereas certain moments of the six first culture models are also depicted in some intercultural culture theories.

Dimensions of a contextual communication

I use this dynamic term of culture as the basis of the concept of my contextual communication. Communication is here understood also as an open and complex process in which people get into conversation that are different in their thinking, speech and action. Thereby three principles are fundamental: The suitability: Where and in which situation it is being communicated? The contextuality: In which context it is being communicated? The individual character: Who communicates? We do say "dialogue of cultures", however these are mainly people who identify themselves more or less with different cultural contexts. A conscious approach to such an extent helps to learn avoiding generalizations such as "the Germans", "the Muslims" or "the Iranians".

The above three necessities are acknowledged related to the fact that each situation is complex, each acting person is unique and the cultural and traditional contexts are diverse. We should always take into consideration that each individual has his own character structure that is potent in communication. There are certainly people that have a totalitarian, authoritarian, extrovert or introvert character structure. There are also people who are courageous or timid. Undoubtedly, this has an affect on interpersonal communication. Insofar, a person's motivation for an action is not only defined by biological conditions but much more by external influences and especially his life story for his biography.

Here cultural predispositions and embeddings are affective. In contrary to post modern anthropology human beings are not worlds that only see themselves. People always belong to a society or group and cannot deny cultural predispositions. A problem occurs when these predispositions are consciously or unknowingly being absolutized or claim universality.

Socio-cultural backgrounds, educational biographies and occupational groups as well as socialisations and the art of upbringing should all be taken into consideration. Who honestly wishes to imbibe these experiential worlds will eagerly seek a thoughtful, understanding, and learning contact with the other.

Basic terms of intercultural communication

What is meant by the own and the other?

In the context of my model I consistently avoid the term "alien/strange", since the term is mostly negatively connoted. "Alien" in German is associated with "uncommon/exotic" and more likely a dangerous connotation, whereas the word "Other" merely is associated with "diverse" which implies equality, and can induce the thought "unity in diversity".

We usually don't say: "I'll have dinner with an alien or a stranger", but rather: "I'll have dinner with the others." It would be funny or even strange to say: "I am working with aliens/strangers in my office", even speaking about foreign colleagues. The assertion alien emerges when we feel insecure, threatened or worried. Alienation did not exist in the past as it is recently produced. It presumably denotes an invention by ethnological creations that cover complex situations with terms which today do not fit anymore the core of the matter.

The different thinking, acting, feeling or mind in relation to the own does not describe a harsh contradiction to the cultural or religious other, but a difference that definitely can be made commensurable. Who implies the incommensurability of divergences, will, like Huntington, take a closed term of culture as a basis. The question of the own and the other is always a question of the identity of a person.



Why are norm of actions important?

A behaviour pattern which is expected in a cultural area or in a context can be felt totally inappropriate in another cultural region or another context.

At the first step it should be asked what culture is for a person when we come into contact with in an intercultural context. The intercultural competence is assessed here. It is necessary when various thinking processes, patterns of action or lifeplans come into contact with each other. It always regards, theoretically and practically, situations, contexts and individual characters of the people.

Three core competences thereby are of special importance: firstly one's own cultural competence, secondly the other's cultural competence and thirdly the intercultural expertise. With the example of Iran and Germany the following references can be made:

1. The correlative term for culture in Persian language is composed of the syllable "Far", e.g. superior or noble thoughts, good as well as virtuous features and "Hang", e.g. folk, group or power (from the Avestan), also "Farhang" the gathering of many elements into which these virtues flow. "Culture" in German means care, cultivation or the processing of something. "Farhang" from Persian and "culture" in German have a more meaningful background than it seems on the surface. Many dimensions of a human life are related to the term of culture.

2. It is appropriate to note that there are two different cultural regions, forms of government with different evolutions and language cultures with diverse socio-cultural and lifeworldly backgrounds which despite of their divergences also reveal similarities.

3. This is expressed in the diversities of the weighing of commands and prohibitions. Consuming alcohol is taboo in many Islamic states, in Iran even forbidden. Enjoying pork is unthinkable because pigs are "omnivores" and are regarded impure, whereas in Germany these facts are irrelevant. Slaughtering a lamb however is regarded in Germany as animal torture, whereas in Islam it has its roots in religious beliefs.

These are the situations in which an intercultural competence is required. It means to grant equal access to each interpretation of a lifestyle's reality, which protect the dignity of a human being. This requires a voluntary humility and thoughtfulness. We must always remember what we need to know, what we may hope for to achieve in a dialogue, and what we must renounce.

Acceptance and Communication

This paragraph deals with culturally and contextually conditioned forms of expression and the misunderstandings that result from them. It especially refers to the descriptions of cultural specific acceptance [ling.: meaning of a word].



In Persian language the reaction towards the statement: "This picture is beautiful" is e.g. "Ghabel nadare" which in a sense means "Take it with you!". This expression is not the declaration of a spontaneous gift distribution gesture, as one could misunderstand. It is but a mere empty phrase, a "Ta'rof", a casual remark, whose hermeneutics is essential for a situationally appropriate understanding.

A very common expression in German for example is: "Da kannst du Gift drauf nehmen". Idiomatically it means: You bet on it!, the literal translation however is: You can take poison on it! Yet, it is certainly should not be taken literally as: "Try out poison for a change!" The expression rather means: "You can be very sure about the fact". Here again, the hermeneutics of word and statement is important.

It is important to consider the individual cultural context and to comprehend each form of expression, which, depending on the situation and choice of words, evokes strong positive or negative emotions in the communicators. Especially sensitive are the areas in which polite and greeting phrases are used, also the so-called Hotwords such as "Shariah", "religion", "Jihad", "homeland", "mosque", "headscarf", and "family".

Signification and Function of Hermeneutics

Both examples show that hermeneutics includes several areas of our life. It is essential because every interpersonal communication is connected to individual understanding and exegesis of actions and thoughts. A thinking, understanding and learning manner between those who are communicating enables a method, which is focussed on bringing the unrelated coexistence of the own and the other into an interactive cooperation.

Intercultural hermeneutics requires: if I for example talk with "Peter", first, how I understand myself as "Ali", secondly, how I see "Peter", thirdly, how "Peter" understands himself and fourth, how "Peter" sees me. The intercultural hermeneutics, after regarding the dialectic connection, seeks a theoretical and practical overlapping of the horizon. Here lies the responsive place in which the will-of-understanding and will-of-being-understood of "Ali" and "Peter" is communicatively, to name an example, complemented. Both must always ask how we communicate, understand and compare, which methods we use, which aims we have and where we anchor the tertium comparationis, the standard of comparison.

Why comparisons?

The same principle applies to intercultural comparative studies. Here, facts from different cultural contexts with regards to their terminologies, questions, and solutions are put into a relation. The standard of comparison is anchored in a tradition but without being absolutized.

Basically, alongside the affirmation of differences and enlightening differences, the main task is the formation of interdependences, overlappings and transition. The specs through which something is being watched is usually branded with certain unconscious colorings. Intercultural comparative studies avoid such a communication threatening distortion. If we take for example the terms "Jihad" and "Sharia", which are here in the West drawn out of their context, translated into a political language and finally being interpreted, eventhough they have totally different meanings.

Tolerance as an instrumental term

Next should be the aim to seek overlappings in comparison and understanding of cultures with regard to their context to formulate rules that have been mutually found. On this basis a vigorous intercultural tolerance can develop to not only achieve a critical-dialogic encounter or differing thinking and life styles, but also to enhance intercultural communication.

The limit of such a tolerance is the violation of human dignity. Hereby, the world and human image, the historical condition of many conventions and religious imaginations of the peoples in an argumentative dialogue with their representatives with regards to the contextualities and individuality must be taken into consideration in order to give an appropriate judgement. The standard of reference of the definition of a border shall always be negotiated with the referring representatives. This process truely shows what effort must be made.

Who creates a generally binding theory of tolerance and the limits to it according to his opinion, assumes, eventhough unspoken, an essentialist term of culture, a unifying human image and a unifying type of ethics. We know from our own experience that dogmatism in discourse requires opposition on every area. Most efforts for an intercultural dialogue are influenced by a self-absolutizing lopsidedness.

Ethics as the basis of Tolerance

Ethics supplies the earth on which tolerance experiences its true unfolding. Intercultural ethics attempts to give the voice of the other from his referential system as a discursive contribution theoretically and practically a chance to be heard. This happens irrespective of religious, political or ideological convictions. She is, like the six other correlative terms, not a plea for relativism of values according to which all is equally right and good. Tolerance neither means that everything is right nor that an absolute truth does not or should not exist.

Intercultural ethics differentiates itself from traditional theories of ethics, because it neither understands cultures essentially nor generalised. It pursues the question whether and inhowfar human actions are good or bad



resp. appropriate or inappropriate. It focusses on the analysis of the reasons to motivate the individuals to implement certain actions.

Looking at ethics through intercultural specs shows, how structures are correlated and decisions are contextually embedded. It shows namely reasons why it is essential to study the world view and human concept, the relativity of many conventions of the peoples in a thoughtful, understanding and learning manner, and to be ready to renounce the habit of reproof for a communicative habit of learning.

Why do dialogues often fail?

Three obstacles of communication should be considered on the way to an open understanding: the claim of truth and absoluteness, the claim of an intercultural inherent logic and the negative power.

At first, let's look at the exclusivistic claim of truth and absoluteness. This claim is usually preferred by those who absolutize the own political or scientific attitude and who demand a claim for universality. This demand for absoluteness lies practically in the singleness of a blessed-producing maxime, to regard the own legislation or political opinion for the exclusive truth and the only reasonable path. Such categorizations we often see in politics, science and society have a unifying character.

Is there a cultural inherent logic?

There are many theories that assume the existence of an inherent logic. They claim that there are cultural regions where people think and act holistically, while at the same time alleging that in other cultural areas people think and act linear-analytically.

A modern leading representative of this dual assumption is US-American anthropologist Richard Nisbett. In his empirical study "The Geography of Thought" he concludes that only Europeans and US Americans think conceptually stringent and factually fully differentiated, while Asians and others come from an overall whole and therefore have holistic thinking, which is rather infatuating.

To understand the nature of Nisbett's theory I request you to do the following test. As the chart shows it is about answering the question in which the relationship between chicken, gras and cow are analyzed. With this simple experiment you can find out whether you think purely European or purely Asian.

The experiment of Nisbett proceeds as follows: He requests 50 "Asians" and 50 "Europeans/Americans" to interrelate the words "chicken", "cow" and "gras". He thereby notices supposedly that Asians understand cow, gras and chicken holistically, as interrelated elements, while Europeans immediately categorize chicken and a cow as living entities, while gras is an element from botany.

To affirm the significance of this experiment, I repeated the whole experiment in the beginning of this semester. With astonishment, I found out that obviously in my course there are almost only Asian thinking students. The examination of this experiment shows us that such geographical theses are inappropriate with the claim of generalization. Rolf Arnold calls such attempts "culture-bound deceptions" and criticizes an acting as judge and jury when it comes to the demand of universality of the occidental reason, which brands the non-European art of thinking and perception as adverse.

This is due to the fact that for many of us it has become very normal to see the world through one's own glasses, to absolutize such a viewpoint and therefore develop a cultural essentialism. Both thinking models, the proposed analytical and the holistic are encountered in all cultural regions. Analytical and synthetical, dissecting and connecting thought processes are general moments of a process of realization of a human being, irrespective of his origin and skin color.

Power and Communication

Power is another boundary of intercultural communication. Power reveals itself in diverse forms such as militarily, economically, technologically or politically. It bears "that chance", says Max Weber, "in a social relationship to push one's way through or even against opposition no matter whether there is a chance or not" (Weber, 2010). To illustrate the question, I differ between negative and positive power.

Positive power is pluralistic and therefore dialogically oriented. It seeks the wellbeing of the other through an emphatic encounter and is aware that only mutual aims may be formulated and achieved. History teaches us that a mere egoistical pursuit of interests at last destroys oneself.

Negative power however is neither pluralistic nor dialogical, but centristic and monological. It is per se dogmatic and highly oriented on escalations. Many conflicts, communication brakes, and wars spring from the negative term of power, where one's own power factually leads to the powerlessness of the other. Every attempt to seriously communicate is destroyed in that way. There is an underlying worldview to rule and be dominant in politics, economics and society according to a certain form of self-legislation.

Hence dialogues fail because of lack of will, prejudices, populistic depreciation of the other, dominance of negative power as well as geographization of thinking. Furthermore, dialogues fail when the opposite is seen in an exotic difference and one assumes the culture circle drawings of a Huntington.



Refusing critical recognition

The paradox apparition of the expression "refusing recognition" articulates two things. On the one hand it is about the recognition of a human being as a person under the acceptance of his dignity and his point of views and convictions which violate human's dignity are refused. The core of this form of recognition is the general unavailability of the dignity of a person. Such a form of recognition affords a flexibility of one's own viewpoint and not the revelation of one's own opinions.

Refusing critical recognition is a way which is found on many levels of politics, economy and society. This correlates to the fact that the human behaviour is always connected to refusing components due to his conflictivity. I, for example, tolerate the way of salvation and demand of Judaism and Christianity although I reject these religions for myself. Yet, I enable the followers of these religions to actively claim the way of salvation for themselves as the absolute and my view as a Muslim with Shiite influence to be refused, if I am conceded that these religions are not my path of the life fulfilling way for me as a Muslim. This means that we would mutually deal equally with each other although we are not the same. The refusing form however reaches its limits where the followers of other views mutually try to proselytize through an exclusivistic practice.



Conclusion

Real communication is approximately possible if we could succeed to develop a dialogical community of "We" from the "I-you-relation" without suppressing or denying differences. Cultural education and reflective hermeneutics of one's own culture is the basis to understand other cultures.



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