

Book Review

Houman A. Sadri and Madelyn Flammia

Intercultural Communication: A New Approach to International Relations and Global Challenges

—Reviewed by

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Index Terms—*Globalization, intercultural communication, international relations.*

Coming from a Finnish language and cultural background, I am accustomed to thinking about the world in intercultural terms: Finland is a small, bilingual country and people are used to using foreign languages. The intercultural perspective is automatically present in my technical communication courses at the University of Tampere, particularly as we enjoy good cooperation with the Translation Studies Department at the same university. Therefore, I am always interested in reading about intercultural communication and new ways of incorporating it into my teaching.

Houman A. Sadri and Madelyn Flammia have brought together their expertise in international relations and technical communication, respectively, and produced a fresh and topical treatment of intercultural communication from an interdisciplinary perspective. In addition to scholars and academics, the book is intended for professionals in business, government, and nonprofit communities. For those who want to use the book for classroom and workshop purposes, a companion website is available for supplementary materials.

The book engages the reader from the very beginning: readers are invited to answer a set of questions which help them reflect on their current level of intercultural awareness. At the beginning, the authors earnestly point out the enormous importance of intercultural and international communication: the ability to communicate

effectively is related to serious global challenges, such as those of overpopulation, hunger, depletion of natural resources, global warming, world health issues, and terrorism.

The book is divided into four parts. In the first part, the central concepts and key theories of intercultural communication are introduced. The main thread running throughout the book is the notion of mindful communication:

We define mindful intercultural and international communication as interactions with members of other cultures in which an individual strives to understand the cultural values, beliefs, and norms of other parties and to use that understanding to adapt his/her communication style to achieve a meaningful exchange and a win-win result. [p. 26]

The book aims to enhance the reader's basic stance as a culturally aware person and his/her ability to act mindfully in intercultural encounters. The citizen diplomat is another key issue, which underlines the power of the individual in contributing to peace in the world. They are ordinary citizens who help shape foreign relations by traveling abroad as students, teachers, or volunteers, or by opening their homes and offices to people from other cultures. Overall, the authors advocate for the use of soft power whose effects tend to be more enduring than military measures.

Part two of the book is devoted to explaining four different approaches to the study of intercultural and international communication: the social science approach, the interpretative approach, the critical approach, and the dialectical approach. The social science approach assumes that human behavior is predictable and that there is a describable outside reality. Scholars using this approach aim to describe and predict human behavior, and they usually rely on quantitative methods. The interpretative approach is based on

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the assumption that reality is constructed and that communication is a subjective experience. Scholars exercising this approach believe that human behavior is unpredictable and creative, which is studied using qualitative research methods. In the critical approach, the historical context of communication and the relationship between power and communication are the focus. This approach stresses subjective reality and the context of communication. Finally, the dialectical approach, developed by Martin, Nakayama, and Flores, brings together the strengths of the three other approaches with an emphasis that intercultural communication is processual, relational, and contradictory in nature. The dialectical approach has six dialectics: cultural-individual, personal-contextual, differences-similarities, static-dynamic, history/past-present/future, and privilege-disadvantage. The dialectics are related to the four building blocks of intercultural communication, namely, culture, communication, context, and power. In addition to explaining the principles of the four approaches along with their benefits and limitations, the authors give insightful, concrete examples of each.

Part three discusses the various processes and technologies related to intercultural and international communication. Chapter 5, entitled "Verbal Communication," covers linguistic differences, issues of translation, multilingualism, and the language of conflict management. Chapter 6 deals with nonverbal communication and examines the influence of cultural values on body language, gestures, and the conception of time and space. Chapter 7, entitled "Visual Communication," discusses how culture influences perception and the use of graphic images. Part three ends with a chapter on mass communication with an emphasis on the relationship between the media and power, and the global impact of US popular culture.

The fourth and final part of the book focuses on ethical dimensions related to culture. Aspects of ethnocentrism and the connection between ethics and power are discussed, and the authors introduce the idea of contextual relativism, which is an attempt to negotiate the tension between universalism and relativism. Those who take the contextual relativist approach "do not believe that it is impossible for them to take an ethical stance in relation to the behavior of members of other cultures, but strive to avoid doing so from an ethnocentric perspective" [p. 264]. The book

concludes with examples of global citizenship, which show that citizens of all types and levels can make a difference. We can all endeavor to be individuals who are open to new information as well as ideas and environments, in other words, mindful individuals.

The emphasis on the American point of view is surprising in a book about intercultural communication. For example, the first two engaging questions in Part 1 leave out the non-American reader: "Are you a first-generation American (meaning that one or both of your parents came to the United States from another country)?" "Does your immediate or extended family practice customs and celebrate holidays not practiced or observed by the majority of people in the US?" [p. 2] In addition, there is an abundance of references to American institutions, organizations, and popular culture, etc. This choice of perspective, and the fact that the intended readers mean American readers specifically, is not openly stated until toward the end of the book: "...we will focus on those organizations most directly relevant to you, a college student in the United States" [p. 246]. Looked at from the viewpoint of a wider international audience, it might have been easier for the reader to start exercising the mindful approach, if the American perspective had been stated at the beginning of the book, or if the book itself practiced the mindful perspective that the authors emphasize.

The book is highly rich in detail, and the work is an invaluable source of information for the reader who is looking for a holistic picture of intercultural and international communication on a global level. On the other hand, its wide scope does not permit a more in-depth treatment of many issues, such as linguistics or translation. There is a fair degree of repetition in the book, which makes skimming and browsing through the book easy, but which might cause some frustration for the chronological reader. However, for classroom purposes, the book is ideal as it offers numerous theoretical viewpoints. Adopting the authors' positive and convincing idea of a mindful communicator will be a fruitful starting point for students and anyone else interested in intercultural and international communication. In addition, the references are placed at the end of each part, making the book even more reader-friendly. With its highly readable text style, the book is a truly comprehensive account of intercultural communication.