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Abstract: *This essay explores the location of rationality in intercultural communication, specifically critical intercultural communication research. Proceeding from an understanding of culture and intercultural exchange as a product of historical/structural forces with embedded formations of power, critical intercultural communication arises in opposition to longstanding dominant paradigms predicated on tenants of objectivity and the formulaic evaluation of claims. We highlight several scholars who have guided attention to the manner in which such traditional notions of rationality often serve to obfuscate alternative configurations of knowledge and social life. In doing so, we suggest that critical intercultural communication affords a broader understanding of rationality, one that rejects universalism, acknowledges the ubiquity of power and privilege in its construction, the multitude of its formations, those cultural experiences displaced by its traditional conception, and one that embraces layers and contradictions long dismissed as irrational. We begin by exploring the various manifestations of rationality within the cornerstones of communication studies. Subsequently, we address the ascension of critical perspectives brought about by interpretive anthropology, feminist studies, and postmodern criticism. Finally, we locate rationality within intercultural communication and critical intercultural communication in particular.*

Keywords: *Rationality, Intercultural Communication, Critical Intercultural Communication, Philosophy of Communication, Communication Studies.*

RATIONALITY AND CRITICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

1. Rationality and Critical Intercultural Communication Research

In the U.S., interest in the philosophy of communication is in decline. Perhaps this is due to the pragmatic and applied nature of our scholarship. Or perhaps philosophical inquiry has simply taken another form. New research programs such as performance auto ethnography and critical intercultural communication studies are implicit critiques of a

former research paradigm clothed in objectivity, control and demonstration. As allies in the inquiry into human meaning making and interaction, the continued reflection on our assumptions and arguments is vital and constructive in many ways and perhaps the most important is building relationships across the international, cultural and disciplinary borders that typically keep our work apart.

Provoked by the theme of this issue, our goal in this article is to make a few observations about the relationship between notions of rationality and critical intercultural communication studies. Central to the study of intercultural communication is the notion that “culture is an idea for recognizing and understanding how groups create communities and participate in social activities”¹ and for examining what happens when a member of one cultural group communicates with a member of another cultural group. Critical intercultural communication “foregrounds issues of power, context, socio-economic relations and historical/structural forces as constituting and shaping culture and intercultural encounters, relationships and contexts”.² This alternative arises in response to the social scientific and interpretive approaches prevalent from the 1970’s to the 1990’s. We take rationality to be a concept that is helpful to understanding the *sensibility* or the *scheme for reconciliation* among arguments, values and social action. But we also take rationality to be culture-bound even as terms such as “reason” and “argument” often pose as universal constructs. As we note below, many before us have problematized rationality and commented on its *unmarked* quality. We simply want to highlight several implications of rationality as a cultural artifact when approaching critical intercultural research.

First we examine several formulations of rationality within the cornerstones of communication studies, next we point to the emergence of critical perspectives advanced from interpretive anthropology, by feminist studies and through postmodern communication criticism. Finally we situate rationality within intercultural communication (IC) studies and specifically critical intercultural studies.

2. Disciplinary Anchors

The influence of the Greek and Roman philosophers is inestimable in communication studies. Bizzell and Herzberg³ noted, “The fundamental concerns of rhetoric in all ages appear to be those defined in the classical period ...” Plato’s notions of “real” truth and “divine” truth as described in the *Phaedrus*⁴ reside in contemporary absolutist discourses and the recommendations for audience analysis in current public speaking pedagogy have their roots in the cultural descriptions found in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.⁵

Aristotle’s formulation of the enthymeme makes clear that he had in mind non-philosophers or “hearers who cannot grasp many points in a single view” who would be concerned with general topics of deliberation.⁶ The enthymeme was a form of syllogistic rationality that dealt with contingent knowledge and probability — famously, the realm of rhetoric rather than dialectic. For Aristotle, the first premise of the enthymeme drew upon common, or cultural, knowledge. In other words, “enthymemes are powerful because they

are based in community beliefs”.⁷ At the same time, the common premises that were so taken-for-granted that they could remain suppressed or unstated in an argument reflected a dominant worldview.

While the contributions are profound, the thinkers of the classical era anticipated a monocultural environment with a common approach to reasoning and deliberation. In his characterizations of human emotions, stages of life, etc., Aristotle assumes a common life experience. For all of their brilliance in developing methods for public valuing and deliberation, the Greeks were ultimately ethnocentric in their disposition. Even in his counters to “prejudice”,⁸ Aristotle does not allow for differences in kinds of perception and assumes a consistent social positionality or location.

In this new millennium “ethnocentrism has converged with power”.⁹ Hence, IC studies have had to struggle to articulate rhetorical and communication traditions across cultures.¹⁰ Next we provide two examples of important modern philosophers and critics of communication who also wrote from a foundationalist perspective.

In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman¹¹ addresses problems of rationality. If two individuals convened in the same situation reach separate decisions, is it possible to assume that each holds the capacity for reasonable action, or rather must we dismiss such an assertion as an impossibility, instead assuming the unreasonableness of one due to inadequate knowledge or actions based on such “irrational motives as passion, interest or capriciousness?”¹² In posing this question, Perelman alludes to the seemingly ambiguous relationship between truth, reason and rationality. Traditionally understood, rationality is taken to be “complete”, proceeding from the “principle of non-contradiction” dictating that contradictory statements cannot both simultaneously be true.

However, as Perelman illustrates, this is seemingly convoluted by the nature of our legal and political structure. The U.S. Supreme Court in particular demonstrates the manner in which contradiction prevails judicially. Does this imply the absence of reason among the judges in the minority, and as such, should it in turn cast moral and intellectual doubt upon the integrity of the Court? Is there an answer to “Who is the best candidate?”¹³ Through such inquiry, Perelman serves to underscore the often paradoxical manner in which rationality manifests itself. In so doing, he appears to offer interpretive space for conceiving of truth in polysemic terms. Yet, like classical theorists before him, Perelman’s quandary is fore grounded in a dominant interpretation of rationality that privileges the framing and evaluation of claims. Perelman can thus be seen as traversing the boundaries of a dominant paradigm that he nonetheless reinforces and resides in. Such interrogation of rationality inevitably echoes that of another disciplinary anchor, Jürgen Habermas.

In his *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas¹⁴ sets out to construct a conceptualization of rationality that is not bound by the objectivist, individualistic premises inherent to modern social theory and philosophy. In doing so he argued that our capacity to communicate is structured by basic, fundamental rules mastered by all subjects in the learning of spoken language. Through speech we convey subjective feelings, desires and intensions to other subjects. Within these processes we inevitably make truth claims, implicitly or explicitly, about the nature of the objective world or the appropriateness of

our speech acts within the social lifeworld we inhabit. Such validity claims are naturally contestable and resolved through such means as appeals to tradition, authority or force. It is within this domain that the idea of rationality has been fundamental, as this commonly entails argumentative reasons for or against subjective positions.

For Habermas¹⁵ this is a realm in which communication can be attained free of coercion, and a site in which an alternative conceptualization of rationality can be developed. Placing emphasis on the social rather than the conceptual, he conceived *communicative rationality* as communication “oriented to achieving, sustaining and reviewing consensus – and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims”.¹⁶ However, Habermas¹⁷ maintained that the level of liberty within society is ultimately dependent on the degree to which its everyday practices and “identity-guaranteeing traditions,” including its processes of socialization, political culture and institutions, “express a non-coercive, non-authoritarian form of ethical life in which an autonomous morality can be embodied and take concrete shape”.¹⁸

As Habermas noted, Liberalism embraces an antagonistic stance toward competing traditions as a means of validating its particular principles and conception of rationality. Such bias ultimately derives from the structure of international languages of modernity that serve as the “grammatical ground” for “boundless universalism”.¹⁹ When confronted with text from alien traditions embodying alternative, substantive principles for truth and rationality, such languages represent them in such a way as to neutralize them. Habermas thus sought to address how a paradigm shift can be brought about through the “endogenous resolution of an epistemological crisis”.²⁰ A requirement in this regard is acknowledgement among bearers of the tradition that the “alien” tradition possesses superior claims to truth and rationality. This necessarily implies that “the rational discrediting of one’s tradition still proceeds according to its own standards of rationality,” while the learning of a “rationally superior tradition” assumes conversion, “the adoption of new standards of rationality.” According to Habermas, “if different forms of rationality inhere in different traditions, there can be no bridge between them”.²¹

While both Perelman and Habermas sought an interrogation of rationality, the *Theory of Communicative Action* arose as an explicit attempt to redefine it. Nonetheless, while reconceived as a social, “communicative act,” Habermas’ formulation also manifested itself within the context of argumentative validity. Thus, both Perelman and Habermas can be seen as operating under a dominant, antiquity-based paradigm. This in turn is reflective of Habermas’ overarching goal; in sketching a critical theory of modernity, he sought not abandonment of the project of Enlightenment, but a redirection of it.²²

3. Traditional Rationality as Cultural Problematic

Mills clearly saw the limits of traditional rationality. What characterized the end of modernity, he wrote, “... is that the ideas of freedom and of reason have become moot; that increased rationality may not be assumed to make for increased freedom”.²³ For Mills,

the complexity and bureaucratization of society eroded social perception. In contrast, the “sociological imagination” drew in multiple perspectives and the understanding of differing and interconnected values.

The work of Kuhn²⁴ and Lyotard²⁵ focused attention to the vulnerabilities of traditional ways of knowing. Feminist writers produced work that revealed the masculinity qualities of prevailing theories and assumptions.²⁶ Even in anthropology, key figures were turning away from positivist generalization and emphasized particularity and interpretation.²⁷

These works along with the growing work in cultural studies (an early and significant U.S. influence was Carey’s essay, “A cultural approach to communication”)²⁸ encouraged IC scholars to broaden the scope of their studies. In the next section, we provide a depiction of traditional rationality from three areas of IC research: whiteness studies, postcolonial studies and postmodern studies.

4. Situating Rationality within Intercultural Communication Research **Rationality as whiteness**

Summaries of the development of IC research have appeared at different times for different aims.²⁹ Consistent across these overviews is the observation that IC research emerged from anthropology as a social science. Since much of the work in communication in the late 1970’s and 1980’s focused on the interpersonal context and was social science based, this new communication context fit nicely within the mainstream of communication research.

But tensions emerged. By 1990, there was a call for closer examinations of specific cultures and to move beyond theory development and validation.³⁰ Additionally, there also was a growing resistance to equating “culture” with “nation”³¹ and opposition to the nonpresence of scholars of color and the lack of representation of scholars writing outside of the Euro-American perspective.³² The growing influence of cultural studies and the growth of area studies began to attract new questions to IC studies — questions that involved power, voice, positionality and liberation.

In hindsight, this social science research occupied the “uninterrogated space”³³ of whiteness. This research secured a position of unquestioned rationality and authority. “Theory development” was regarded as scholarship of the highest order and the discovery of “generalizable” constructs was seen as the most needed contributions. The association with science worked to “privilege reason, objectivity, and masculinity, concepts that have long been viewed ... as stable, and therefore more trustworthy, poles in the dialectic relationships that exist as reason/emotion, objectivity/subjectivity, masculinity/femininity”.³⁴ At that time, those outside the center who called for the inclusion of new questions and alternative methods were considered Others who were not regarded as IC scholars.

5. Rationality and Postcolonialism

Postcolonial studies emerged from the convergence of a number social and intellection conditions, most notably the wave of decolonization movements following World War II.

The new nation-state formation that this brought about culminated in the rise of the “third world” as a political entity. However, natural resource depletion by former colonial powers, coupled with prior suppression of independent political structures, diminished the resources necessary for the maintenance of civil society. Such socio-political realities ultimately served as the catalyst for vast “third world” migration to the urban centers of the former colonial powers.

One result of this migration was an influx of ex-colonized peoples into institutions of higher learning, notably in the U.S. and Britain. This in turn served as the foundation for “the institutionalized birth of postcolonial scholarship in the academy.” Postcolonial intellectuals thus ascended into positions of teaching and areas of scholarship that sustained a focus on “international cultural perspectives”.³⁵ Early theorists such as Said³⁶ and Bhabha³⁷ sought to reveal the hidden intersections between knowledge, culture, power and politics and called for inquiries into alternative forms of knowledge, a task answered by those who have follow him.

As Shome and Hedge note, “in its best work, [the field] theorizes not just colonial conditions but *why* those conditions are what they are, and how they can be undone and redone.” This transformative stance is ultimately predicated on an attempt to reconfigure historically constructed forms of knowledge production that are bound to “various histories and geographies of modernity”.³⁸ Such institutionalized forms of knowledge are recognized to be “always subject to forces of colonization, nation, geopolitics, and history”.³⁹ As such, postcolonial scholars reject the unquestioned “rationality” inherent to positivist assumptions regarding the existence of universal, objective truths, instead challenging and rewriting established epistemic orientations through an exploration of, and connection to, alternative and negated pasts and presents. Such a trajectory has in turn often served to eclipse in constructive ways the boundaries between postcolonialism and IC research.⁴⁰

6. Rationality and postmodern critique

Echoing postcolonial theorists, Lyotard also proceeded from an interrogation of prevailing notions of knowledge. For Lyotard, the “grand narratives” of modernity, or *metanarratives*, namely those rooted in Enlightenment and Marxist notions of social change, ultimately fail to adequately conceive of knowledge in the “postmodern” era. Further, technological achievements brought about by an economic “redeployment” in the present phase of capitalism demonstrated a transition to symbolic and linguistic production as the defining features of the postindustrial economy and culture.

Scholars responded to the critique of modernism from different areas of communication studies. For McKerrow, this has meant considering how to “reconstitute” a centuries-old area of inquiry “for the discourse of the Other to be heard ... and heeded”.⁴¹ He asked us to “consider rhetoric’s potential — conceived in a modernist universe, dominated by a specific form of rationality, oriented toward systematic appraisal leading to predictive power and leading to perfectibility of whatever its object might be — for addressing those cultures

that share not at all in these visions”.⁴² For other critical IC scholars, this has meant an emphasis on the *relational* aspects of research to create a balance between the macro and micro relevancies of a context. For Conquergood, “The communicative praxis of speaking and listening, conversation, demands copresence even as it decenters the categories of the knower and the known”.⁴³

Many IC researchers now take an activist stance, that is, to *speak with* communities,⁴⁴ which implies an allied relationship that is built upon “active engagement, participation and personal involvement”.⁴⁵

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the places of rationality in relation to communication studies with particular attention to critical intercultural communication research. From antiquity, philosophers have valorized the systematic and disciplined framing and evaluating of claims. Even in 2013, the National Communication Association (USA) states as a goal the promotion of “the effective and ethical practice of human communication”.⁴⁶ “Effectiveness” and “ethical practice” themselves are hallmarks of regularized and rules-oriented (or formulaic) methods for validating claims and decisions.

We have pointed to several scholars (there are many others as well) who drew attention to the limitations of the dominant paradigms and in various ways created fresh terms and concepts that accommodated or made new space for elements of social life that were problematic or rendered invisible in traditional rationality.

What do we conclude regarding the relationship between rationality and critical intercultural communication studies? The goal is not to dispense with notions of rationality; instead we offer the following suggestions:

- We should recognize that what is “rational” is a historical and culture-based outcome. Rationality cannot be universalized and cannot be disconnected from the social relevancies and situated interests that gave it meaning and presumption.
- We should understand that “the rational” is synonymous with power and privilege. We need to continually reflect upon how this power dimension plays out in public debates and deliberations. Ultimately, what is rational can be considered a rhetorical trope employed strategically to advance or impede particular policy positions.
- We should be open to *rationalities* that surround us. Like late modernism and postmodernism intertwined, various rationalities are intertwined. Anzaldúa⁴⁷ made a compelling case for a *mestiza* border logic (condensed in the term “hybridity”) that arose from a unique blend of ancient and indigenous worldviews, European and U.S. colonizing efforts, colliding national identities and the pressures of modernism. She argued for the acceptance of the *mestiza*, not just as an identity but as a way to apprehend and deliberate border policies and moral choices.
- We should be open to cultural experiences that traditional rationality marginalizes. For example, when Wangari Maathai⁴⁸ realized that scientific explanations from professional

foresters would not be understood by Kenyan women as the Green Belt Movement attempted to teach women to plant orchards and other trees for self-sufficiency, she asked the women to submit folk methods for planting and called the women “foresters without diplomas.” The method became a wonderful success.

- Additionally, we should be open to expressions of simultaneities, layerings and contradictions that typically are considered irrational in traditional rationality. Collins’ concept of the “outsider-within” to explain African American women’s “point of view in the world”⁴⁹ expresses a perspective of alienation and intimacy that is valuable for intercultural researchers but problematic in traditional rationality.

These suggestions are not surprising or novel. Recent IC studies have moved from the identification of *what* to creating narratives of *how*. Sorrels and Nakagawa describe this shift as inquiry that leads to IC praxis: “Philosophically speaking, inquiry is situated in what a number of Continental thinkers have characterized as an ‘interrogative’ mode of being in the world The interrogative mode both opposes and complements the received western tradition of advancing statements of assertions as truth claims”.⁵⁰ Burawoy⁵¹ describes this “interrogation” as a means to “dialogue”.

We concur with the conclusion by Halualani, Mendoza and Drzewiecka⁵² in their assessment of IC studies that multiple research perspectives can inform one another. They argue that “insights and struggles from critical perspectives may help to create productive — albeit passionate — dialogues across paradigmatic perspectives and research methods, not to engage culture and intercultural communication in the same way but to lend ‘eyes’ and ‘hands’ in obscured areas, tight spots, and difficult-to-traverse realities (colonized cultures and identities, structured inequalities, rampant marginalization)”.⁵³

Our conviction is that subsequent issues of *Hypothesis: Communication and Rationality*, will present such dialogues “across paradigmatic perspectives” and that multiple understandings of communication contexts and processes gain place and voice.

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