

# Toward a social psychology of intercultural communication: Processes, barriers, interventions

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**Keywords** relating to the topic of the proposal: intercultural communication, social cognition, language, social psychology, intergroup relations

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## Abstract (max. 50-100 words):

How does communication between members of different sociocultural groups affect intercultural relations and understanding? Given the suitability of methods and concepts of experimental social psychology, the scarcity of pertinent research is striking. The workshop brings together social psychologists from relevant fields (e.g., language, social cognition, cultural differences) to explore and coordinate perspectives for experimental investigations of intercultural communication. Particular attention is devoted to barriers for desired outcomes and to the role of communicative and linguistic factors. A key benefit is deeper insight into interventions for improving intercultural relations.

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## Section II: (not more than 7 A4 single pages)

### The case for an exploratory workshop (max 3 pages)

#### Background

Intercultural communication has become one of the most challenging issues in today's world owing to the surge of information technology, availability of mass media, as well as long-distance travel and migration. It occurs when, at a minimum, one individual engages in communication with an individual perceived as having a different cultural background. Across various disciplines, intercultural communication has become an active field of research, characterized by rich theorizing and empirical evidence on naturally occurring intercultural encounters (for overviews, see, e.g., Bolten, 2007; Gudykunst, 2005a; Jandt, 2006; Lustig & Koster, 2002; Neuliep, 2009; Samowar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998).

#### The need for research in experimental social psychology

The importance of intercultural communication is attributed largely to its fundamental role in intercultural relations. The hope is that it can improve understanding (Gudykunst, 2005b),

mutual perception, and social relations between people with different cultural backgrounds. One of the key tasks of scientific research is to reveal the *causal factors and mechanisms* leading to beneficial and detrimental outcomes of intercultural communication. This approach extends beyond normative appeals that alert people to the need for intercultural communication (e.g., Neuliep, 2007). Clearly, the mere occurrence of intercultural communication, which has become increasingly unavoidable in today's world, might be a necessary condition for the above beneficial effects but it is not sufficient. For instance, people may feel uncertain and anxious in communication with members of a different culture (Berger, 1992; Gudykunst, 2005b; Vorauer, 2006), and exit an intercultural encounter feeling drained cognitively and emotionally, frustrated, or estranged from each other (e.g., Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

The scientific concepts and methods of current social psychology (e.g., Dunn, 2009) are ideally suited to investigating the causal factors that prevent or promote desirable outcomes of intercultural communication. Social psychology has developed an increasingly rich gamut of concepts for studying interpersonal communication and language use, intergroup relations, and cross-cultural differences in psychological phenomena are core of social psychology. Also, the experimental methodology used by many social psychologists today is, although not the only one, a primary means for examining causal mechanisms to outcomes of interest. When feasible, the experimental manipulation of factors assumed to influence intercultural communication and its consequences for intercultural relations allows controlled and precise tests of causal hypotheses (for examples in cultural psychology, see Kitayama & Cohen, 2007).

In contrast to this close match between the repertoire of experimental social psychology and the research desiderata, a closer inspection of extant research reveals several gaps. First of all, there is a striking scarcity of approaches from experimental social psychology that directly address the processes of intercultural communication. The bulk of research on this topic has been within other fields such as business, communication studies, education, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. Due to this orientation, micro-level processes at the individual and interpersonal level have received little attention. Hence, knowledge regarding the interplay between cognitive, motivational, linguistic and interpersonal processes in intercultural communication is lacking. Also, experimentation has played a relatively minor role in this domain compared to correlational designs based on observation, interviews, and surveys. Further gaps become apparent when reviewing related work in social psychology. A productive and venerable line of research has investigated whether and when contact and interaction reduces intergroup biases and prejudice based on sociocultural categories (e.g., Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Klein & Snyder, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998). For instance, minimal, non-hostile interaction with an out-group member has been found to improve intergroup perceptions (Gaertner et al., 1999). However, little is known about the exact processes of interaction that improve understanding and relations among members of different (sociocultural) groups. Importantly, the role of genuinely communicative and linguistic factors in intergroup relations has not been addressed in a coherent program of research.

#### Goals of the workshop

Against this backdrop, the chief goal of the proposed workshop is to bring together researchers (ranging from senior leading experts via mid-career scholars to young scientists) in pertinent fields of social psychology to explore, develop, and coordinate new perspectives for social-psychological investigations of intercultural communication, specifically the impact of communicative and linguistic factors on intercultural relations and understanding. This approach is innovative and needed given the state of research outlined above. Several currently active social-psychological subfields have much potential to make novel contributions in the field of intercultural communication. Because leading researchers in these relevant subfields of social psychology have agreed to participate, the workshop will offer unique opportunities for cross-talk, integration, and intellectual synergy. Specifically, based on the participants' recent work, specific approaches will be presented and discussed during the workshop, such as the following approaches:

*Social tuning and shared reality.* In what conditions does communication tuned to an audience from a different sociocultural group lead to actual convergence between the speaker and the audience's representation of the target? These studies build on recent

research on the saying-is-believing effect and socially shared reality (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005; Echterhoff, Higgins, Kopietz, & Groll, 2008; Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, in press). A pertinent and novel question is whether communication-based interventions can improve intergroup relations, assessed either by indexes of shared reality (saying-is-believing effect) or implicit measures of intergroup attitudes (e.g., Sinclair et al., 2005). For example, although communicators typically tune messages to both an ingroup audience's and outgroup audience's (positive vs. negative) attitude toward an individual, effects on communicators' own representations of this target are found only after tuning to the ingroup (but not the outgroup) audience. This difference can be explained by the communicators' lower motivation to create a shared reality with outgroup (vs. ingroup) audiences (Echterhoff et al., 2005, 2008). The challenge facing this program of research is now to identify conditions in which the creation of a shared reality with members of cultural outgroups is possible.

*Embodied grounding.* How do nonverbal factors (such as nodding, imitation, physical closeness) affect intergroup perceptions and attitudes? In this regard, the "embodied grounding" framework (Semin & Smith, 2008) may be particularly useful to address intercultural communication. Embodied grounding depends on synchronous non-verbal communication. This may be especially difficult across cultural dividing lines. For example, communicators may need to devote many cognitive resources to the decoding of language, dialect, or idiom, with deleterious effects on their body language. Embodied grounding may be impaired not just by delayed timing but also because of cultural differences in the meaning and appropriateness of gestures, interpersonal space, and other nonverbal cues. Also, approach-oriented non-verbal behavior (nodding, open body language) in face-to-face conversation with strangers could have feedback effects on communicators' attitudes (Kawakami, Phills, Steele, & Dovidio, 2007), eventually improving intergroup relations.

*Metaperception of culture and message tuning.* How does people's perception of their own culture affect their communication with members of cultural out-groups? People may drop or "translate" elements that they view as difficult to ground with their audience. We may wonder to what extent these efforts actually succeed in the development of a shared reality with the audience. Indeed, speakers may seem uninteresting or the content of their communication may seem quite naïve and empty thereby decreasing the relational and epistemic motives that should drive shared reality formation. In this respect, intercultural communication is an ideal testing ground for recent social psychological perspectives on language (e.g., Fiedler, 2008; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008; Klein et al, in press; Semin, 2007), which suggest that many of the cognitive consequences of language use in interpersonal communication are actually incidental and unintended rather than the product of a cooperative effort. This could be studied through the serial reproduction paradigm (Clark & Kashima, 2007).

*Language use in the context of intercultural communication.* How do speakers modify their use of language depending on the cultural affiliation of their audience and of the target? How do these variations influence the audience's attitude towards the target and the target's group? We plan to build on recent research (Douglas & Sutton, 2003; Douglas, Sutton, & Wilkin, 2008) inspired by the Linguistic Category Model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) to address intercultural communication. Examples of pertinent linguistic factors that could improve intergroup understanding include: positive verbal descriptions of a stranger's initially incomprehensible behavior; or preserving culturally alien elements in retelling a story from a stranger.

*Identity performance and intercultural communication.* In the context of intercultural communication, people may try to adapt their behavior as a function of specific norms associated with their social identity (e.g., when addressing a German, a Turk may want to show that s/he is very open-minded). How, and when, do these forms of "identity performance" (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007) obstruct or facilitate intercultural communication?

*Research integration: The relation between intergroup and intercultural approaches.* In studying intergroup phenomena, social psychology has paid very little attention to differentiating groups defined in cultural terms from groups defined in terms of social categories such as occupation, age, gender, or ethnicity. Yet, communication between individuals from different cultural groups poses specific challenges that go beyond those commonly studied at the intergroup level (e.g., prejudice, stereotypes, racism). Contrary to

simple social categories, cultures are rich systems of meaning (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998), based on accumulated patterns of values, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviour in a community. In communication with an outgroup member issues related to competition, conflict, respect, politeness, norms and values, or possible insults and slurs should be salient. By contrast, in communication with a member of a different culture interlocutors should attend to a greater extent to grounding and possible misunderstandings. This workshop may constitute a unique opportunity to address empirically, and through the lens of social psychology, the unique challenges posed by intercultural communication.

#### Expected benefits and outcomes

Following from the above, a key benefit of the workshop will be the development and integration of new perspectives for social-psychological investigations of intercultural communication, specifically the impact of communicative and linguistic factors on intercultural relations and understanding. Addressing these factors will ultimately allow researchers to develop and test specific interventions aimed at improving intercultural communication. Regarding such future research activities, we plan to develop the emerging research network within the framework of a European Collaborative Research Project (ECRP). The workshop and the program have been designed to allow the development of such a project. There is a clear trajectory leading to the submission of an application within the ECRP schema in the Spring of 2010, with core teams from the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, and Belgium (pending re-entry of the FRS-FNRS into the ECRP scheme) and associated partners from France, Italy, USA, and Australia.

#### The need for European-scale collaboration

Collaboration between European researchers is needed for the following reasons. First, conducting the project, including the empirical studies, on a European scale will allow us to generalize findings to different cultural contexts. It will also allow us to take into account the specific challenges posed by intercultural communication within the European social and political context.

Second, the research questions raised above cannot be addressed by single researchers or single teams. To fulfil the promise of the present approach, it will be necessary to dovetail and coordinate approaches focusing on cognitive, motivational, emotional, linguistic, and interpersonal mechanisms and factors. Thus, an integrated effort of specialists in the different domains is indispensable. As it stands, the leading experts in many of the relevant fields are based in Europe. Thus, the project's success hinges on bringing together these researchers from the different European countries, supported by a select number of non-European scholars (from the US and Australia).

Third, European researchers have been relatively underrepresented in the field of intercultural communication (compared to e.g., the US and Asia) especially in psychology. A long term goal will be to contribute to the development of a European research community working on this topic as we believe that such research needs to be informed by the specific challenges posed by the European context.

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#### **Preliminary Workshop Programme:**

To prepare the ECRP application, the workshop will be structured in "teams" (which are associated with a specific country in this framework) working on specific projects:

**Team I: Tuning in intercultural communication.** German Team (Gerald Echterhoff, Ulrich Kühnen & René Kopietz) + Stacey Sinclair & Betsy Paluck (commenters)

**Team II: Common ground in the context of intercultural communication.** Belgian team (Olivier Klein & Laurent Licata) + Yoshihisa Kashima & Anna Clark (commenters)

**Team III: The role of history in intercultural interaction.** Polish Team (Michal Bilewicz, Mirek Kofta) + Denis Hilton, Laurent Licata, Olivier Klein (commenters)

**Team IV: Language in the context of intercultural communication.** British Team (Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton) + Anne Maas & Gün Semin (commenters)

**Team V: Embodiment in intercultural communication.** Dutch Team (Gün Semin & Francesco Foroni) + Robbie Sutton, Gerald Echterhoff (commenters).

**Prior to the meeting:** Each group will have sent a draft of its project by December 20, 2009. This will allow other participants to be optimally prepared for the meeting.

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## **List of proposed participants:**

### **Germany:**

- Gerald Echterhoff, Professor of Psychology (area social psychology), Jacobs University Bremen. Key words: interpersonal communication, interaction in intergroup contexts, social cognition, shared reality, memory in social and cultural contexts
- Klaus Fiedler, Professor of Psychology, University of Heidelberg. Key words: Language, social cognition, emotion and cognition, stereotyping, lie detection.
- Ulrich Kühnen, Professor of Psychology (area social psychology), Jacobs University Bremen; Chair of the field "Attitude Change, Value Change, and Intercultural Communication", Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (BIGSSS). Key words: cross-cultural social psychology, self construal in collectivist vs. individualist cultures, cultural differences in conversational norms, communication in surveys
- René Kopietz, Postdoc, Bielefeld University, Bielefeld. Key words: social influence, communication effects on memory and judgment, shared reality, situated cognition
- Jens H. Hellmann, Ph.D. student, Jacobs University, Bremen. Key words: communication, social cognition, person perception, political psychology

### **United Kingdom:**

- Karen Douglas, Senior Lecturer, University of Kent, Canterbury. Key words: language, communication, persuasion, conspiracy beliefs
- Robbie Sutton, Senior Lecturer, University of Kent, Canterbury. Key words: communication, normative and justice concerns, language, lay understandings of social psychological process
- Müjde Peker, Ph. D. Student, University of Kent, Canterbury. Key words: stereotyping, communication, discussion, consensus
- Yvonne Skipper, Ph. D. student, University of Kent, Canterbury. Key words: communication, feedback

### **The Netherlands:**

- Gün Semin, Academy Professor, Utrecht University. Key words: Language, communication, social cognition, embodiment, linguistic indexes of social distance
- Francesco Foroni, Postdoctoral researcher, Free University Amsterdam. Key words: social categorization, language, implicit social cognition

### **Belgium:**

- Olivier Klein, "Chargé de cours" (≈ associate professor), Université Libre de Bruxelles. Key words: Stereotyping, collective memory, communication, common ground
- Laurent Licata, Assistant Professor, Université Libre de Bruxelles. Key words: Collective memory, cultural diversity, conflict, reconciliation
- Sabrina Pierucci, Ph. D. student, Université Libre de Bruxelles. Key words: Audience tuning, memory, communication
- Sandy Schuman, Ph. D; student, Université Libre de Bruxelles. Key words: Mobilisations, Internet, communication, identity performance

### **France:**

- Denis Hilton, Professor, Université de Toulouse II. Key words: Language, causal attribution, pragmatics, collective memory
- Anna Clark, Post-doctoral researcher, INSEAD, Fontainebleau. Key words: Language, communication, interpersonal relationships, event construal

### **Poland:**

- Michal Bilewicz, Assistant Professor, University of Warsaw. Key words: prejudice, intergroup relations, infrahumanization, apologies, collective guilt
- Mirek Kofta, Professor, University of Warsaw. key words: prejudice, intergroup relations, infrahumanization, apologies, collective guilt
- Adrian Wojcik, Ph. D. Student, University of Warsaw. Key words: prejudice, intergroup relations, infrahumanization, apologies, collective guilt

### **Italy:**

- Anne Maass, Professor, University of Padova. Key words: language, intergroup bias, stereotyping
- Andrea Carnaghi, Assistant Professor, University of Trieste. Key words: language,

hate terms, social cognition, implicit and embodied attitudes

- Catarina Suitner, Ph. D. Student, University of Padova. Key words: social cognition, gender stereotyping, culture

#### **Outside Europe:**

- Yoshihisa Kashima, Professor, University of Melbourne, Australia. Key words: culture, communication, common ground, language
- Elizabeth Levy Paluck, Assistant Professor, Princeton University (currently Harvard University), USA. Key words: Social norm perception, media communication, field experimentation, perspective-taking
- Stacey Sinclair, Associate Professor, Princeton University, USA. Key words: Social tuning, shared reality, implicit prejudice, self-stereotyping, social interaction

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