

Piller, Ingrid, *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction*

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Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at diversophy.com

Ingrid Piller has written a short and deliberately critical volume of introduction to Intercultural Communication. It is geared toward students, and attempts to provide them with an up to date view of the field from a strongly sociolinguistic perspective, employing discourse analysis as the principal methodology. It represents a growing trend toward surfacing the neocolonial roots of contemporary intercultural theory and the practices derived therefrom. It illustrates how these may bear, preserve, and reinforce harmful and distorting biases in today's world. It has a strong and incisive critique of what I have come to call the "urcultures," those deep transnational discourses driving the social construction of reality in the West and increasingly in the globalized world of corporate capitalism.



Commonly accepted paradigms of market economics, social structure, and world order are unconsciously woven into urcultural discourses. These are allowed to drive most of what we think and do in everyday life, including, in the present treatment, the ways we think about culture and how it operates in ourselves and others. Recent critiques of intercultural disciplines including this one do not hesitate to point out how much of the research study on theory of the field now appears locked into repetition and oversimplifications in how cultural groups are defined along national and other ill-defined lines. They cite overdependence on the assumed relationship of language to the genesis and perpetuation of how a culture is constructed, and how values and dimensions of an abstract nature, largely interpretive labels generated by research, employed to willy-nilly belie the rich complexity of human interactions.

The volume is designed to be a textbook. Each chapter starts with a brief statement of objectives and each ends with a summary of key points, suggested resources for further learning as well as suggestions for follow up activities on the part of the students. This being said, one has the impression that it is more of an ideological briefing, as practical methodology being explained and modeled in such a way as to serve as a take away for the students. Perhaps this is assumed to occur in classroom student–teacher interaction, but one would expect to see more of it concretely exposed in a foundational textbook.

One of the problems of approaching such a text is that, generally speaking, *no one owns the intercultural field*. We are made up of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural and intercultural psychologists, comparative religionists, departments of management, etc., as well as everyday practitioners who conduct training focused on managing diversity and intercultural issues. While each of our fields has its own terminology and priesthood, one largely sees the same corpus of research, historical and contemporary, being repeatedly drawn upon, though spiced to some degree by recent field-specific work and reflection.

In a very short first chapter, the author offers an overview of her aims, namely, to see and critique the current common ground of cultural discourse and suggest new perspectives and opportunities for exploring them to her students. While, as I mentioned, I would have expected more, she does fulfill these aims.

Chapter 2 introduces ideas and terminology used in the field of intercultural communication. It offers two sample situations to illustrate these concepts. The first explores an exchange between a Korean shopkeeper and an African-American customer, and the second examines research on the strategies of travel journalism in the tourism industry. This leads to a critique of the weakness of culture as a concept, as well as of the propensity to offer quick popular guides to understanding it to an eager marketplace. The reader is left with the impression that culture is nothing more than a highly used and abused concept, an ideological construct. One has to examine its use carefully because labeling of differences as cultural is all too often proffered, paradoxically, to eliminate examination of the real issues and conflicts and misunderstandings among people.

Several perspectives are commonly used to describe culture in essentialist terms as an entity and as something that people do as:

- a national asset, treasure or heritage, its artsy aspect,
- a challenge to be met in interacting with foreign institutions and people, cultural savvy,
- something that constitutes group identity, particularly in the form of national citizenship, which generally results in the inclusion and exclusion of certain individuals and groups from belonging to the group defined in the culture.

Chapter 3 tracks the "genealogy" of intercultural communication to show how it was "talked into existence." It opens with two lines from Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and compares them with a contemporary text, suggesting that preoccupation with culture, such as we know it today, was not a factor as such when Julius actually met Asterix. A few (unquoted) lines later, however, Caesar describes the then Belgians (not today's Bruxelles Eurocrats by any means) as the fiercest tribe of the region, because "they were farthest from the culture and civilization of Rome's provincial reach" (*cultu atque humanitate provinciae longissime absunt*). I cite this seeming contradiction not to fault the author on a minuscule point (one which would, in fact, support her thesis), but in general to fault ourselves as interculturalists for often not knowing our history. Ignorance means both "not knowing," as well as "not paying attention to something." Attentiveness to cultural differences, the inclination to bias, and "playing the culture card," are human dynamics recorded at least as far back as the Persian Empire, perhaps even a contributing cause to the demise of those hairy, smelly, Neanderthals. They characterize imperialism and colonialism long before the 19th century, to say nothing of their fueling such popular propaganda as *La Leyenda Negra*, still alive and well in today's economic policies and popular stereotypes, if no longer blatant in primary school textbooks, as it was when I was a child.

I am no friend of the urcultures of colonialism or of neo-colonialism, but do want to call for caution about a tendency toward politically correct, oedipal rants focused on faulting recent scholarship. I am happy that Piller, while obviously unhappy about what she sees, does not go to

this extreme. She tracks, albeit briefly, developments leading to the current status of intercultural disciplines in an orderly way, highlighting, understandably, researchers in her field of linguistics and their relationship to cultural theory and practice.

Chapter 4 addresses language and culture. The key word here is *relativity*. While there is a daily interaction between language, perceptions and behaviors, dictionary equivalences have a hard time explaining them to us. The pitfalls are common and misunderstandings easily occur, as those of us who speak more than one non-native language well know. Miscommunication in such areas as healthcare can be deadly, and the stigma of accent and limited linguistic ability is conducive to biases that are destructive of community and the human spirit.

In Chapter 5 Piller tells how the concept of *nation* is used to draw upon, construct or reconstruct and disseminate what is described as its true national culture. It is convenient these days in intercultural work to refer to “national” cultures, when trying to learn about others and interact successfully with those different from ourselves. If one is not discouraged from using data contained in these profiles by the reading of texts like this, one must at least be alert to the constructed nature of national identity, its political, social and psychological uses and the need to dig beneath its accumulation of banal stereotypes.

Certainly it is time for interculturalists, both theoretical and practical, to pay attention to the urculture of nationalism and national states, as well as to applying vastly oversimplified interpretations of cultural values and dimensions that are likely to be taken as hard truth and supported by emotional buzz on this level. As a linguist Piller is strongly concerned with the tendency to oversimplify the relationship of language to culture. Certainly language has been used as a politically unifying force, often by the imposition of a single tongue chosen from the dialects of the region that is being nationalized. On the other hand, without fully embracing Benjamin Whorf’s views, we should not underestimate the legitimate and constant interplay of culture and language and its effect on the identity and self-identification of those who speak it.

In her attack on stereotypes, Piller adopts and wields the critique of “banal nationalism” pointing to it in school curricula, marketing, and advertising, wherein identity is given and reinforced in a community which is in fact far too large to experience itself as such. This identity is embraced, affirmed and glorified, making it difficult to recognize both internal diversity and cross-border similarities. Stereotypes should not be confused with identifiable, statistically verifiable behavioral tendencies that can be found in groups, even though not accurately predictive for individuals in the group. In other words, the human mind is so structured such that in all cases we begin with what our listening to in a situation automatically brings forth. Call these stereotypes if you like. In any case, further comprehension of the matter or person at hand demands that we know that such stereotypes are only spontaneous theories, starting points rooted in our bio-social needs to survive, whose applicability we need to withhold as inconclusive as we inquire further. We also make mistakes.

Unfortunately the widespread penetration of essentialist descriptions of individuals and groups, and static use of stereotypes about ourselves and others, matched with the urge "to get on with

it," suggests the need for new and better tools in how we educate ourselves to think. Of course, we all belong to different cultures and multiple ones at that. Without a doubt, this tells us we have an even greater need for improved heuristics to understand and qualify the dynamics of cultures as we identify their influences at work.

In the context of globalization many of the social constructions embodied in what we call cultures are writ in ever larger letters, as a part of people's need to make sense out the increased mobility and the invasion of new and unfamiliar products into the marketplace of goods and services. We easily accept that communication never occurs without there being vested interests on the part of the parties involved, but we don't necessarily recognize the latent interests, our own or others, in the discourse we adopt. If, as Dominique Wolton suggests, "communication is cohabitation," interests need to be surfaced in the analysis of our discourse. We need to be clear, first with ourselves, then as necessary, with others, as to what those interests are and how we see them being fulfilled.

The world of work, examined in Chapter 6, provides a large laboratory for examining language usage and competence, allowing us to see how ideas of culture can either identify or mask dysfunctions and disagreements. We have cultivated national states as geopolitical entities and constructed cultural identities for them for half a millennium now, and this era of human history is far from over. Furthermore, when a substantial number of corporations have greater resources and more global clout than many nation states, they too must be considered as shapers of the identities of those within them and those around them.

Within organizations language is a significant issue, not just when deciding on what the lingua franca of the organization will be. The choice continually impacts employees with limited multilingual capacity. People risk being classified and promoted on the basis of linguistic standardization. Piller offers six linguistic-cultural challenges for organizational communication in the current multicultural environment, all of which need to be understood with sensitivity toward contexts and complexity, and addressed using tools offered by several disciplines.

Probably the most fascinating urculture challenge lies in growing our ability to recognize the extent and impact of *commodification* on our lives. While one could insist that there is or should be a multiplicity of bottom lines in our human activity, virtually all of them today are driven by perceptions of market value and coopted by the language of commerce. Chapter 7, entitled "Intercultural communication for sale", is one of the best written and most impactful chapters of the book. It looks at the force of banal stereotypes and the priority accorded the English language in marketing and advertising, and examines their corrosive dumbing down effect on the consumer mentality. We live in a hall of mirrors, looking at the same old stuff, as scientific marketing provides class and educational niches for us reflecting the cultural stereotypes we accept about ourselves. Most interesting here is the author's discussion of the growing phenomenon of "non-language," the use of slogans, words and phrases that have slipped the anchor of the language they were launched in, and now, commercially branded and controlled, bear us to an exotic place called "nowhere in particular."

In Chapter 8 we look at how intercultural romance is commoditized. Here the stereotypical soundbites of marketing define the nature of relationships, romance, and marriage, and set our expectations about them. The author compares the stereotypes and experiences of Filipinas and Russian women as Internet mail order brides. While women are generally positioned as the victims of this love trade, however true this may be, the manipulation of men occurs in this same discourse and in the transactions flowing from it. This limitation, though not noted by the author, can cause significant damage. Little or nothing is ever said, I might add, in social critiques of globalization and injustice about the victimization of men, not just minority men, in the workplace or as cannon fodder. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the violence and bloodshed will not be diminished until it is just as unacceptable to kill a man as it is a woman or a child.

This reviewer was somewhat humored by the anecdote telling how a Japanese man resented the pressure to say, "I love you." He loudly complained about how US, Western, cinematic romance style was being forced on him. He (and perhaps the author) is apparently unaware that countless US and European men, as well as those on other continents, have long resented this pressure. Asked the question, "Do you still love me?" a Midwestern US man is reported to have responded to his wife, "I told you I loved you the day we were married 30 years ago. If anything changes I will let you know." This well executed discussion of the market management of romantic love is about as far as this book goes in noting the existence of gender politics in intimate relationships. The topic would make a great sequel.

Next, in Chapter 9, we reenter the workplace, now from the perspective of on-the-job diversity. Most of what is here was inferred in earlier chapters, but here we are sharply focused on the kinds of bias and racism that are likely to disadvantage the person who looks and talks differently from the dominant group, causing the pain of exclusion and limited participation. The use of culture and cultural explanations to mask bias, ethnocentrism, and racial prejudice is laid bare here. Organizations need to come to grips with this, not just for the sake of the inclusion of migrants who speak a different language, but for the organization to successfully relate to today's labor market.

The chapter reviews several national policies particularly in the US, Canada and Australia, and points out how, though progress has been made on a number of fronts, little is done to reduce discrimination stemming from linguistic and paralinguistic differences. While immigration policies tend to support language education they are hard pressed to address these more subtle sources of discrimination. Tests of linguistic competence are still likely to exclude groups and individuals who deviate from the commonly accepted norms.

Chapter 10 speaks of intercultural communication in a multilingual world, discussing the challenge of language proficiency in non-native languages used by multilingual speakers. Here again, lack of fluency and local style are easily interpreted as inferiority, giving reason for such speakers to be overlooked in both work and social contexts. The author seems to be of the opinion that linguistic considerations and discourse analysis should replace prevailing forms of cultural analysis. While it is true that linguistic limitations can cause misunderstandings, and the differing patterns of

thought and priorities may deepen them, even in trying to resolve them, culture does have a role to play.

Case in point: Piller illustrates the assertion with a rather longish exchange in English involving a French airline passenger and Swiss-German ticketing staff. It may be true, as the author notes, that the parties may not want to understand each other, as sometimes happens when argument reaches a certain pitch. However, in the case cited, if either or both sides had enjoyed a bit more cross-cultural savvy concerning each other's potential communicative preferences, they might have come closer to a more agreeable conclusion. The author seems to reject this possibility by offering a relatively stereotyped image of interculturalists as deluded into thinking that a few nostrums on their part would resolve such situations and create "paradise on earth." Cultural work is but a tool among others. If you have a car, you may use that tool to drive an injured person to the emergency room; you can also use the same vehicle to stage a drive-by shooting.

This refrain is echoed in Chapter 11 where Piller projects her expectations for the future of intercultural education. Firstly, I couldn't agree more strongly with her that people in the intercultural fields should engage in "more frequent and more serious conversations with movements for social justice." I also find it evidence that concepts of culture and products of intercultural research, like so many of our best intended values and practices, can be used to undergird despotism, jingoism and bloodshed, as well as fuel capitalistic kleptocracy. *Corruptio optimi pessima.*

On the other hand, if a passion for social justice is going to be effective, we all need to cultivate diligent insight into the intercultural sources of our problems and to become increasingly courageous in addressing them, as we assiduously build bridges with colleagues from different disciplines. For Piller's vision and other current critiques of the intercultural field to take hold, we need to resist stereotyping each other's work.

A few closing comments.

Many of Piller's citations and examples are fascinating for a non-antipodal as they draw on Australian native peoples' experience and its discourse with the Anglo invasion. Intercultural scholarship is booming in Australia and we are benefitting worldwide from it.

When I completed a first reading of the text, it felt to me as if it were written by two different people, roughly the first half feeling a bit choppy and seemingly less cohesive, the second being a smoothly written analysis of key areas where she unfolds the consequences of oversimplified cultural interpretations. As the author admits to writing the book over an extended period of time, this may account for some of the unevenness. Emphasis in both parts of the book, however, is essentially on the consequences of much intercultural discourse as it exists today.