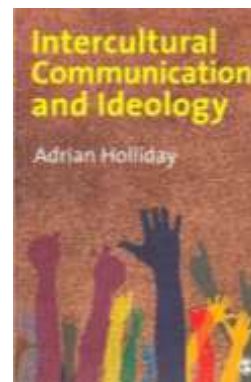


Holliday, Dr Adrian, *Intercultural Communication & Ideology*

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

When I first picked up Adrian Holliday's treatment of *Intercultural Communication and Ideology*, I had a single question in mind, namely: Given the nature of intercultural work and the connections it brings with people in all walks of life and all corners of the earth, why are so few interculturalists in fact activists, particularly on causes that are akin to their interests? Helpers, yes; but activists, definitely no!



My knee jerk response was an expansion of the old adage that “talking religion and politics and perhaps social justice are bad for business.” Another speculation is that we simply lack the balls to do so. Since perhaps 80 percent of the intercultural profession is female, this is both physically accurate and functionally absurd, given some evidence that women's values system (perhaps an essentialist view?) seems bio-culturally attuned to recognize danger and protect the innocent and abused. I shall return to this question after a careful reading and review of the book.

Holliday has to create, adopt and adapt a lot of the language to engineer a focus shift on how we do culture, so depending on one's appetite there is either a feast or a surfeit of neologisms and labels--enough of them to constitute the *dramatis personae* of this review. While the author furnishes an alphabetical glossary, which the reader should keep a finger in, here are some critical terms as touched by my reading:

- **Critical Cosmopolitans:** The good guys who value diversity and understand that current cultural theory and practice are social constructions suffused by ideology and political interests, etc. that cause us to marginalize numerous cultural realities and blind us to them.
- **Liberal Multiculturalism:** The crowd with the desire to help (“Those poor people need our help!”), mixed with chauvinistic commodification of the other (see below). Liberal multiculturalists are part of the Western-Center, the “modern world,” heirs of unexamined, even deliberate colonial thinking.
- **Essentialist Othering:** The inevitable route from labeling legitimate cultural characteristics to consciously or unconsciously supporting demonized stereotypes about the nature of the Other. As the author notes, “...one does not have to be westernized to be modern...” Illusions to the contrary are a prelude to collapse. Essentialists can be ferreted out in a fixed sequence of six steps, ending in the collusion or resistance of the group being othered.
- **The Periphery:** The non-Western peoples of the world as seen through neo-colonial eyes and the impact of this perception on those who are targets of it (othered).
- **Commodification:** Essentialists gone shopping for difference, celebrating acquisition of the foreign other. (“Did you bring home any quaint memories, souvenirs, strays?”)
- **Critical Interpretivist Methodology:** Critical Cosmopolitans in action. One perhaps never fully escapes from the residual stereotypes that are culturally normalized and reified in the psyche, but three practices are suggested as helpful in the here-and now-approaches to getting a new framework for understanding each other. The first is **thick description**--getting beneath first and kneejerk impressions by supplying or searching out non-abstract and

copious data about the people, the situation and the context. Next is **bracketing**, suspending commonplace assumptions and judgments. Finally, **making the familiar strange**, by putting easy answers aside in order to study and see the larger picture of the other. These practices are incumbent not only on one party but on all who enter the discourse. The author produces a list of seven investigative steps that facilitate the interpretative approach.

- **Universal/Particular:** Locating socio-cultural construction in one's cultural ambience vs. appropriating it in the self.
- **Cultural residues:** Bits of the big culture passing through personal experience and becoming incorporated in a smaller cultural grouping.
- **Normalizing:** This describes what has happened at the point at which a social construction becomes taken-for-granted.
- **Reification:** Entirely forgetting the "unreal" nature of social construction.
- **Discourse:** A handy term with less fixed boundaries for avoiding essentialist terminology.

Undergirding of Holliday's work is the thesis that, "...current common and established approaches to defining and describing cultures are in fact bearers of an ideology." Clearly it is naive to assume that theories and practices in this or any other field are untouched by ideology, to say nothing of personal and group interests. Ideology is everywhere whether conscious or not, chosen or inherited or deliberately propagated. Though Holliday largely eschews discussions of values per se as part of the essentialist terminology of how intercultural work is currently constructed, an ideology is, in fact, *a values set* like any other. It drives behavior as inevitably as gusts of wind drive the waves, not uniformly, nor stereotypically, but certainly. In the words of the late *eminence grise* of popular culture, Elvis Presley, "'Values are like fingerprints. Nobody's are the same, but you leave 'em all over everything you do.'" So too, ideology.

The problem generated by the use of the term "ideology," like the label "racism," makes it hard to distinguish between conscious espousal and residual presence of such associated paradigms and values in the minds and hearts of people. While Holliday offers a theoretical explanation of this dynamic when he speaks of normalization and reification, a great degree of polarity and resistance is created by politically correct but relationship damaging language. My life experience tells me that I have benefitted from "tough love," the ability of some people to "tell it like it is" to my face. It works best when the love comes through the tough. Insinuations that sound too blameful create denial and resistance. It is not easy for anyone even in an academic analysis to 'fess up to latent racism and cultural chauvinism. The many anecdotal fragments that illustrate the inquiries of this book require careful teasing out and caring analysis if they are to apply beyond academic research and become fresh methodology for how we practice intercultural professions. This is about finding our identities anew as we co-habit an ever tighter space, with our similarities and differences both on the surface and brewing in our understanding of them in ourselves and others. As I write, the lyrics of Seal's song, "Love is what I need to help me know my name," keep running through my mind. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iczaDcixBj4>) These comments are not to fault the author but to turn our wits to taking what he says seriously and facing the challenge of next steps.

Holliday is far from the first to fault the boilerplate of our field and its applications, but in using ideology as a flashpoint and offering examples of the kinds of inquiry that take us beyond what we embrace as our methodology, he places us at a fork in the road. Changes in our area of our expertise are threatening. There is loss of power (and money) and perhaps self-esteem in giving up well-branded theories and tools and embracing new ones. We prefer evolution to revolution, but at

some point we become impatient. The rough patch of taking this road, however, is that the current explication tends to do exactly what it demeans by offering too many simplistic stereotypes of contemporary paradigms and practices. While the author acknowledges this as a possible criticism, there is no reassurance. His judgment about the “dominant essentialist view” is often based on crude stereotypes of what interculturalists, in all our diversity of approaches, struggle with and what we do. One wonders if this alienation is necessary to launch a new, more incisive process. In a spotty way, Holliday has perhaps begun a process for cultural studies much akin to starting what the late Howard Zinn has done for history in his long career. The title of Zinn’s memoirs speaks for the message of this work as well, *You can’t be neutral on a moving train!* Holliday’s book is in part a rant that unfortunately needs to be read. I suspect many academics will fault him on method and many practitioners complain of his complexity, while perhaps the appropriate response is, “Thanks for the kick in the pants, but go easy, man!”

As to its execution in print, *Intercultural Communication and Ideology* is not a facile read. The author explains how he chooses and uses anecdotal material in groping toward new principles and procedures for unfolding the ambiguity of our intercultural encounters. Recognizing how opaque this may appear to readers, he alleviates the strain by how he closes and reinforces the work of each chapter. A short boxed “summary” contains principal points made in the chapter. This is followed by an “Investigation,” which offers a sequence of tasks, where the reader may put them into practice, hardly a polished workbook but an incentive to engage with the material. Finally, the footnotes conveniently follow in each chapter, rather than chucked to the backroom of the volume.

Holliday only tangentially touches on what I perceive to be the “elephant in the room,” namely the ur-culture (reified and particularized) of economic systems that drive most of the human enterprise at this moment and support the essentialist perspective for mastery, marketing, media and money. Despite despair about deconstructing “indelible politics,” consciousness is rising as I write: the Arab Spring has become the hot Arab Summer; Britain’s self-image is in a shambles as the media hacking scandals suggest hitherto unthinkable corruption, and the USA has apparently lost its wars in the Arab/Persian (pick your chauvinism) Gulf and, along with this, its economic stability, and the populace smells a rat. I am not feeling so well myself...

Imperialism is losing its clothes. The deconstruction that Holliday sets loose on intercultural discourse inevitably extends to these economically and politically constructed worlds, As the author notes, “The only hope of undoing this false consciousness is for the established world to appreciate the degree to which it is based on the ideologies and prejudices of the dominant imagined world and to become open to the counter discourses of the marginal world.” Holliday hints at some enlightenment about this being available in some of our mysticisms and philosophies, which, unlike their popular construction as escapism, rely on unlearning.

To return to the question with which I began this review: Why are interculturalists not activists? Hitherto, it has been too scary to step out of our dominant imagined world—there seemed to be no life support system. Activism may be, but is not necessarily going to a demonstration with a sign and a megaphone, but it certainly is about pointing to and raising the volume on how important it is to raise consciousness about dominant imagined worlds.