

## **Ethnic Relations and the Decline of Civility\***

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\* *Presidential address of the Sixth "International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication: East and West," the biennial convention of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, at Tempe, AZ, USA, March 27, 1997.*

Good morning, and welcome to the Sixth International Conference on "Cross-Cultural Communication: East and West." In several regards, this is a momentous occasion. Even though we are holding our sixth biennial conference, this is the first major event of our newly established International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies (IAICS), an organization whose vision transcends the artificial boundaries of academic disciplines and political nations and which provides a forum for our scholarly skills and energies to address the interdependence of all peoples. I am especially pleased to serve as the first President of IAICS and to address our first plenary session, but I would undermine my presentation about civility if I did not recognize our founding fathers and acknowledge their work on our behalf.

Please join me in recognition of Professor Bates Hoffer of Trinity University (San Antonio, TX, USA), Professor Nobuyuki Honna of Aoyama Gakuin University (Tokyo, Japan), and Professor John H. Koo, recently retired from the University of Alaska and currently at Arizona State University (Tempe, AZ, USA). IAICS emerged from years of dedicated work by these three distinguished scholars who in 1985 formed a loose organization which ultimately led to the development in 1987 of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Research, situated at Trinity University (San Antonio, TX, USA). Alternating sides of the Pacific Ocean, their first biennial conference was held in Seoul, Korea (1987); the second in San Antonio, TX (1989); the third in Tainan, Taiwan (1991); the fourth in San Antonio, TX (1993); the fifth in Harbin, China, PRC (1995), and our sixth here in Tempe, AZ, USA (1997). The founders also established our journal, *Intercultural Communication Studies*, with the first issue appearing in the Spring, 1991. Most recently, that is shortly after the fifth biennial conference in Harbin, they began to

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create IAICS. I have worked with them since the first conference in San Antonio, 1989, and willingly accepted their offer to become the first President of IAICS. In many ways, we are the beneficiaries of their dedicated and conscientious efforts. Let us accept the challenge to realize their vision of a better future through our scholarship about language and communication.

Consistent with the vision of our founders, my address will consider the topic of "Ethnic Relations and the Decline of Civility," an intercultural subject which demands our immediate attention and will probably command the continuing attention of many future generations. Even a casual reader of any major newspaper or news magazine encounters a barrage of ethnic strife from throughout the world, as almost every continent is afflicted with these problems, and few nations enjoy ethnic peace and tranquillity. For most of my professional career I have struggled both inside and outside of the classroom with these concerns. In retrospect, however, I must confess that I often escaped direct engagement of these serious problems by treating my subject abstractly or digging ever more deeply into cleaner research. Occasionally students would press or push me into the perplexing world of ethnic discord, but even then I tried to keep my distance. Motivated by the ravages of ethnic strife at home and abroad, I have begun within the last few years to alter my university courses to wrestle with the realities of disintegrating social life around our world. Accordingly, my presentation today is more than a protocol performance; it is, instead, an ongoing report of my systematic confrontation with the social disease of ethnic strife.

Because of the personal significance of this address to me and because of its potential for you, I would like initially to identify a catalyzing and precipitating factor which strongly motivated my present course of action, and then provide a conception of culture that may better assist our analysis of ethnic problems. From these points of departure, I will introduce a position about the relevance of civility and what we can do to better our world on the basis of our skills, knowledge, and limited opportunities. Most importantly, and perhaps the primary purpose of this presentation, I want everyone of us to leave this plenary session with an enhanced commitment to action; that is to say, I want us to realize that the vision of IAICS is to transcend limitations and to utilize what we know to make our world better for all groups whatever the basis of their differences.

### **Compelling Motivations**

Have you ever noticed the parallel between the chemical processes stimulated by a catalyst and the operations of our mind? We may have many ideas or chemicals floating around, and then something catalyzes intense activity. Such was my state of mind during the spring months of 1996 when I was trying to settle on my topic for today. With Professor Hoffer gently nudging me to specify a title for my presentation, I drew upon some recent conversations about ethnic problems and our ineptitude at talking about them. So, I tossed him a title and thought that I would simply reflect on it for a while, gathering information from diverse sources as I formulated my position. And

then, from a most unlikely source, a catalyst fell into my placid thoughts and energized them with tumultuous intensity. This chemical reaction so stirred my very person that it became the precipitating cause of my present course of action. Let me describe that catalyst for you.

In addition to national and international communication organizations, the USA has four regional associations dedicated to the study of human communication, with each providing an annual convention, a quarterly journal, and several other services. My home state of Texas is aligned with the Southern States Communication Association. With my membership, I receive the *Southern Communication Journal*. Summer, 1996, was the final issue for Editor Andrew King of Louisiana State University. In his last issue he provided a short editorial entitled "The Summing Up" (p. 363). Rarely do I read such notes, but fate provided me a few odd minutes before an appointment, and his title caught my eye for no other reason than retiring editors often conclude their tenure with many lessons learned. \_

King's comments shocked my perennial, yet complacent, optimism. "As I leave my editorship," he wrote, "my most vivid impression of our field's scholarship is of a somber humanism unfamiliarly mixed with nihilism. Perhaps it is only the *fin de siècle* sense of exhaustion, but the bulk of the manuscripts brought me to the margin of despair." To explain this emotional reaction, he identified two dominant characteristics of the submissions: "The first is that society achieves cohesion through victimage. Many articles featured the serial mugging of groups as the flywheel of social mobilization. Their point was that if Brutus could not destroy others he would destroy himself." The second characteristic was "the necessity and the impossibility of constructing new social visions. The common argument: our contemporary crisis of meaning demands the production and destruction of ideologies at an ever increasing rate. The weaker our social text, the more robust social analysis becomes." He concluded with an ominous warning from the German philosopher Spengler: "There is the dark moment when all concentric forces become eccentric and the dance macabre begins."

Because of their relevance, my reactions to King's editorial deserve a short chronicle. Initially I felt like one of the witches from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as I stood before a cauldron of mixed ingredients stirring up some potential evil for my adversaries. Vicariously experiencing King's pain, I lashed out in my thoughts at the deconstructionists who had torn the text from our lives, rendering nothing permanent or sacred except the processes of interpretation. I wanted to thrash the scholars who had made unbridled relativism the ultimate rationalization for "do your own thing" and "anything goes." My critical acuity, as well as my blood pressure, reached a peak as I stirred, and stirred, and stirred my intolerant and unholy ideas. After a few days of this contemplative bitterness, I paused one morning while shaving. In a fleeting moment I perceived the social value of mirrors: the reflection permits us, if we open our eyes widely enough, to see ourselves as others see us. Just as I was looking to others for the causes of our social failures, I had neglected to see how others could similarly place me

in this chain of blame. In what ways, I mused, am I in my own modest ways responsible for the disruption, if not destruction, of our social fabric?

The more I pondered my role, the clearer my vision became. With the world struggling with ethnic strife, I wanted to avoid the issues or at least avoid studying or writing about them from the standpoint of my scholarly expertise. I was so captured by a sense of political correctness and cultural sensitivity that I was unable to speak out, thus leaving the forum open to the extremists who never seem to suffer such reticence. With this frustration and momentum, I approached my topic with renewed vigor and an unanticipated eagerness. Even though my topic originated with dim light and little heat, my revitalized interpretation increased the light and heat, resulting in greater clarity and surging passion. With renewed energy, I broached the problem of ethnic discord. Armed only with the tools of scholarship, I launched into the fray.

### **Culture and Ethnic Relations**

As scholars and many other problem solvers tend to do, I started at the most basic level by listing what I can safely assume about my subject: (1) Poor ethnic relations comprise a serious social problem throughout the world. (2) These problems seem to emerge from diverse causes and within widely different contexts. (3) People who address ethnic problems continually identify cultural variables at work, and some extend these problems to panoramic proportions. For example, American political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) and his disciples argue that conflict among cultural diasporas is rapidly replacing the cold war and its conflict between superpowers as the context for future international relations. (4) Virtually every writer acknowledges more or less that language and communication are variously woven into ethnic conflicts. (5) As a professed expert in language and human communication, with special concern for intercultural communication, I should be able to help with these problems.

From these basic assumptions and observations, I asked, where can I turn? In other places I have written about what it means to assume an intercultural communication perspective toward a subject (1997), but some pieces of the puzzle are still missing. Even with the caveats, my intercultural perspective and inclinations compelled me to examine the cultural dimensions of these social problems more carefully and then to use those insights to help me better conceptualize ethnic discord. This rather personal series of steps have led me to revisit my conception of culture.

Like the notion of meaning, the concept of culture is pervasive and defined variously to fit nearly any and all circumstances. In fact, many scholars have abandoned both concepts as too expansive for theoretical use. I continue to use these two concepts and would draw on an insightful approach to meaning by American philosopher May Brodbeck for a more useful conceptualization of culture (1968, pp. 58-78). In her analysis Brodbeck differentiated levels or categories of meaning by a subscript with meaning<sub>1</sub> indicating the object or idea referenced, meaning<sub>2</sub> identifying significance or a lawful connection of one term to another, meaning<sub>3</sub> referring to intentional meaning, and meaning<sub>4</sub> signifying psychological meaning. Without

digging into her distinctions, suffice it to say that she used these variations to facilitate use of the concept meaning in the development of theories and discussions about science, and to make far clearer exactly what she was specifying in her subsequent arguments. On a parallel with this line of analysis, I recommend that we differentiate levels of culture which may, in turn, enhance our efforts to conceptualize the problems of ethnic relations.

For many years I have recited to students my definition of culture as a three-part process of (1) knowing and behaving in a manner acceptable to persons who are members of the culture; (2) developing the semantic framework to facilitate appropriate knowledge and behavior, and (3) transmitting and/or perpetuating this knowledge, framework, and behavior. This abstract, behaviorally oriented, cognitive definition has provided a useful point of departure for my students of intercultural communication. Conveniently, I chose to omit "haute couture" and artifactual remains of culture as the business of others who are less concerned with the vicissitudes of culture in the functional, daily ways of life. I was also somewhat aloof from those who would merely list the many ingredients of culture, such as attitudes, values, beliefs, myths, folklore, and many others. My process orientation about culture meshed neatly with my concern for communication processes, and, in turn, permitted me to evade the content of culture. Addressing ethnic relations, however, forced me to confront both the processes and substance of culture, and especially the interrelationship of process and substance. My definition, therefore, needed expanded reconceptualization, and Brodbeck's approach to meaning suggested a viable way.

As I have read about ethnic conflicts during the last few years, three prominent features of the commentaries have struck me: First, the underlying causes of the problems are varied, but seem to fall into general categories of economic, political, and religious value differences. Poverty, powerlessness, and spiritual deprivation are regular features of such analyses. Second, the writers regularly comment on the language and communication activities of the participants. Whether the varied expressions of position, the latest caption for their cause, or the stages of negotiations, the interactions of the different groups are variously discussed. Third, diagnoses usually address the clash among various dispositions and prejudices growing out of either the values or the interactions. Differences of attitudes, beliefs, misattributions or stereotypes often become the mediating variables between the value differences and actual behaviors. Based on these realistic commentaries, I was led to a three-part conception of culture similar in some ways to Brodbeck's approach to meaning, rather than to my convenient process orientation which seems to capture only a portion of the total concept.

This line of reasoning generated a three dimensional model. Culture with a subscript v (Cv) constitutes the first dimension and embraces core values. The second dimension is culture with a subscript p (Cp) which embraces the mediating predispositions, such as attitudes, beliefs, and stereotypes. The third dimension offers the behavioral operationalizations; here we have culture with a subscript o (Co), the

space where language and communication interface with other aspects of culture most directly. To apprehend this three dimensional model, consider another icon in my life, the golf ball with its core, the surrounding rubber bands, and its cover. Just as golf balls have evolved, so too has our conception of culture evolved in that the core, its surrounding substance, and cover have become more unified into a single ball with far greater dynamics than prior versions.

Like most models, this one can help us analyze problems with the dynamic processes it embraces: Ethnic strife usually emerges from a history of suppression and unequal treatment by one or more groups. If everyone had equivalent resources, power, and spiritual freedom, then I suspect that we could eliminate ethnic strife. But such a circumstance is only a twinkle in the idealist's eye, and we will probably never achieve such equality on earth. Thus the economic, political, and religious causes will remain deeply centered in ethnic conflicts. Because most people acknowledge a more realistic world, the problems shift to the second dimension where value-rooted predispositions displace and complicate the lack of capital, power, and spirituality. Instead of simply asking for more assets, ethnic minorities make impassioned statements of their predispositions until they weave a fabric of injustice which they wear on appropriate occasions. Language and communication enable them to form these perceptions into tangible artifacts with a greater sense of permanence and illusory security until their vision is blurred and distorted. Thus we can use this model to generate questions about all three dimensions and possibly sort out the nature of an ethnic problem and directions for its resolution.

As a student of intercultural communication, my use of this model will emphasize rhetorical analysis, broadly defined as the systematic study of functional symbolic behavior. Within this methodological framework are many thoughtful procedures for the study of language and communication, and in one way or another most of the membership of IAICS conducts rhetorical analysis. More of us simply need to study the discourse of ethnic groups and the groups they engage, sort out the problems of basic cultural values (Cv), relate these problems to the predispositional matrix (Cp), and then study how ethnic groups, other co-cultures, and the overculture tactically and strategically pursue their goals (Co). In this fashion we can potentially identify the salient aspects of each dimension of the problem, and the enhanced conception of culture will keep us continually aware that all of the pieces ultimately integrate. This approach should enable us to present and examine the social fabric objectively, locate the agreements and disagreements, and build a diagnosis and prognosis accordingly. If this approach works as expected, the dialogue about the problem should improve. Unfortunately, no groups really enjoy the social value of mirrors and often resent the careful examination of their actions. In fact, ethnic groups are sometimes so engrossed with an immediate goal that they cannot see what they themselves are doing to thwart their long-term efforts. Our work with language and communication can provide a basis for clearer reflection and possibly more thoughtful dialogue.

We may lack the power to rectify problems in the cultural dimension of core values or Cv. We can, however, use language to aid with values clarification, and through our rhetorical analysis we can locate the motivational despair of social inequities. We may define the complaints, weigh their intensity, and determine their level of justification. For this dimension, I suggest four general patterns of value relations: (1) Convergence of values of different groups can lead to the disappearance of conflict and greater homogeneity. (2) Parallel development of differing values can stabilize differences with reasoned agreement to disagree, but with respect for the equity of positions. (3) Divergence of values can result in greater misunderstanding and lessened cooperation through increased separation and segregation. And (4) the denunciation of values of one group by another can deny the opportunity for resolution, contradict reason, and create revolting circumstances. Values clarification through rhetorical analysis of Cv can help us identify the relationship among sets representing different groups, and thus generate a basis for rational approaches to the problems.

The next layer or dimension of ethnic problems concerns Cp, the collective predispositions of one group about other groups. If our initial values clarification at level Cv does not uncover sufficient motivational force for the strife, then predispositions may represent hardened categorizations which do not permit reasonable flexibility. At this level, rhetorical analysis will consider stereotypes of the groups and break them down through careful language analysis. How, for example, does the estranged group label and categorize the other ethnic groups, co-cultures, and/or overculture? How are these labels combined or configured to create myths and storylines about their intergroup relations? Do these rhetorical categorizations generate subversive themes and chains of destructive characterizations? Are they susceptible to legitimate consideration or do they instantly enflame opposition? Answers to these questions may provide some control over abusive predispositions if we can bring them up for public scrutiny and objective consideration. If we are unable to subject them to legitimate scrutiny, then they will function as subversive stereotypes inimical to reasonable consideration and to improvements in intercultural relations. The central problem at this level is defensive unwillingness to examine in public our predispositions about other groups of people. More open consideration is prerequisite for checking the counterproductive outcomes of this dimension of culture.

The third and most encompassing dimension of culture is the behavioral operationalization or Co. Here the collective behaviors of the ethnic groups are formed into tactics and strategies for pursuit of their goals and objectives. If our values clarification is thorough, it should lead to clear coordination of goals and strategy. If the values analysis is ambiguous or vague, then the goals may float without a definite tethering point, or, worse yet, vary with the faddishness of more fickle predispositions. The latter scenario will result in tactics confused with strategies and no clear strategic development. In many ways this becomes a volatile, dangerous combination that is conducive to ready manipulation by articulate participants who for whatever reason thrive and often survive on confrontation. The Co level is most observable and any

rhetorical analysis can piece together the patterns of action, but without the underlying causes from Cv and Cp, the determination of strategic possibilities is weakened. Whatever anyone does to correct the situation exclusively at the Co level will likely fail, but through this analysis the grounds for addressing problems at Cv or Cp can develop. What our scholarship must achieve is realistic depiction of these rhetorical behaviors and the opportunity to break down the conflict into manageable proportions.

Throughout this profile of cultural analysis emerges a central argument: culture, language, and/or communication are rarely the cause of ethnic problems. They are all, however, concomitant manifestations of human difficulty, and, as such, become a vital source of data for the analysis of these problems. Just as they are not a primary cause of ethnic conflict, they are also not a solution, but because of their concomitance they become essential propaedeutics for problem solution. In other words, our rhetorical analysis can help us describe and analyze ethnic problems and create a perspective which will permit us to contribute toward the healing of this social disease. We should never, however, imagine that our approach is the answer. We can best serve to elucidate and frame the problems for those people with greater social power to resolve them. Our greatest value may well center on identification of the dimensions of the problems and the interrelationships among the various levels of rhetorical behaviors. To achieve our potential contribution, we must develop ways to call more attention to our analyses.

### **Ethnic Relations and Civility**

During a recent presentation at Trinity University (2/21/97), David Maybury-Lewis, the prominent American anthropologist and internationally renowned cultural activist, accentuated the importance of addressing ethnic relations. "If ethnicity is not accommodated in modern society," he argued, "it will poison it." Drawing upon his personal experiences, he noted the "growing tendency to recognize ethnic legitimacy" as "countries throughout Latin America are classifying themselves as pluri-ethnic rather than mestizo" and governments are shifting away from policies of killing off these ethnic groups through genocide or total assimilation to programs of recognition and inclusion. This shift, he explained, seems based on the realization that "ethnic conflict does not come from expression of ethnicity, but rather from the suppression of ethnicity."

In other parts of the world, ethnicity is not only recognized, but variously celebrated. Yet, even at this more positive end of the continuum of ethnic viability, relations among ethnic groups and with the dominant over-culture are problematic. In these situations, such as the USA now represents, ethnicity has become more than a matter of recognition and respect for one's diversity. It has become a political instrument for social engineering as groups employ their ethnicity to secure whatever they may from the existing power structure. Unfortunately, in the process of this legitimate employment of ethnic identity our ineptitude at discussing the issues and rhetoric of this ethnic gamesmanship is diminishing the constructive vitality of ethnic

diversity and exacerbating the problems of ethnic conflict (Hill & Lujan, 1983 and 1984). Somewhere between the genocidal policies toward ethnic groups and the rampant abuse of ethnicity lies a more reasonable approach to the positive development of ethnic identity and relationships among all groups. Creating an environment where we may achieve such balance is where civility and our potential intervene.

In a recent speech at Trinity University, former US Senator Bill Bradley examined what he perceived as the primary political issues facing our nation (3/4/97). Among these was our problem with ethnic relations. He offered a very simple solution, or at least a first step toward solution of this problem: "We've got to talk to each other," he observed, and then he extended this simple idea into a number of challenges. He made quite clear that the USA, as the remaining superpower on the stage of global politics, cannot lead the world without moral quality; so, we must treat each other equitably and fairly and thus set a model for other countries. How can we hope to guide the world, I was stimulated to wonder, when we are so tongue-tied in dealing with our own circumstances? As some of you probably know, the US congress held a retreat a few weeks ago to address the decline of civility in the operation of our own government. They seemed to recognize that restoration of civility was a first step in overcoming the gridlock of ineptitude undermining reasoned discourse about our national policies and agenda.

As scholars and teachers we are in positions to advance the cause of civility which may permit us to open perspectives about ethnic problems and to create opportunities for their resolution. To realize this prospect requires us to examine the concept of civility, what it entails, how we can nurture it, and how on the basis of its revitalization we can advance our rhetorical/cultural approach to ethnic discord. For help with this task, and quite predictably, I turned to a colleague for help. Trinity is fortunate to have Colin Wells, a distinguished British professor of Classical Studies, who guided me through the historical evolution of the Latin concept of civility.

In his biography of the Emperor Claudius, Seutonius noted how being restrained and unassuming (*civilis*) Claudius refused the title of Emperor; that is, he refused to be so-called, preferring to be called first citizen (*princeps*). The Oxford Latin Dictionary quotes this passage and translates *civilis* here as "suitable to a private citizen, unassuming, unpretentious." Focusing on this idea of *civilis princeps*, British classicist Andrew Wallace-Hadrill discusses *civilitas* or civility, and defines the concept as "the conduct of a citizen among citizens" or the politeness and consideration due to one's social equals (1982). He further noted that ". . . it is not until the second century A.D. that an abstract noun is formed: the ideal can be described as *civilitas*" (p. 43). From this historical vantage point, we can understand how civility came to imply a set of behaviors which make a leader good or bad in relation to the people governed.

On the contemporary scene, we understand the concept to embrace these two ancient dimensions, but it has become generalized beyond the behavior of emperors to include the populace as well. On the one hand, the concept refers to the performance of our duties as citizens, and, on the other hand, to an ethical code of behavior

appropriate to good citizenship. Thus civility refers to our assumption of citizenship and behaving toward each other in a civil manner which translates as affable, courteous, differential, gracious, polite, and respectful. If we further translate these synonyms for civil behavior, they collectively imply avoidance of rudeness toward others, the observance of social requirements, and a positive, dignified, sincere, and thoughtful consideration of others (Random House Dictionary). As we incorporate these qualities into codes of habituated behavior, we refer to civilized people forming themselves into civilizations. Obviously, civility is closely related to the reasonable consideration of problems between groups of people.

Because civility is expressed symbolically, our rhetorical analyses can become indispensable for the operationalization of guidelines. Simply reflect on the papers at our recent conferences about the idea of "face" and how people in different cultures engage in face-saving interactions that create more civil situations for the resolution of personal concerns. What we need to do with this example and hundreds of others which come from our research is to teach our students the relevance of such principles for effective citizenship and the use of these guidelines in the actual treatment of ethnic problems. At no time in our history is this task more compelling; we must prepare our students for lives of civility and give them the instruments of respect, rather than the weapons of destruction which come from the neglect of civility. To meet this challenge would only require modest alterations of our scholarship and teaching strategies. We can easily shift our attention to the broader implications of our work for enhanced intercultural communication and more cooperative ethnic relations.

### **Projections and Conclusions**

When I began the preparation of my presentation, I had a genuine, but somewhat modest, commitment to this subject. The despair reflected in an editor's postscript catalyzed my behavior well beyond what I expected to do on this occasion. For the past few months I have been unable to extricate myself from this topic. I sincerely hope that my comments will serve to catalyze each of you to transcend the boundaries among our disciplines and nations and join in the vision of IAICS to use our skills and knowledge to make our world a better place for all groups of people. What began for me as a sojourn into an interesting subject has passed the point of no return. My work with intercultural communication has attained a new focus which will help my students and me to become more civilized in a world of interdependent people.

As we approach the end of a millennium on Western calendars and reflect on the lessons learned from it, I hope that we will see the importance of pulling together the best of the East and West in a broader remedy for the diseases of social disintegration. Among the possibilities are two prominent schools of thought. From the West and our individualistic orientation come the concepts of dialogue and self worth. From the East and their collectivistic orientation come the concepts of social order and community. If we can integrate these two orientations, we will have the basis for a new millennium created from the strengths of our different orientations. One of the greatest dangers to

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this integrative way comes from ethnic instability. If we can use our potential for rhetorical analysis, perhaps we can enhance our leadership in describing the problems more usefully and creating approaches which foster reasoned consideration of the confounding differences. My suggestions may not be the answer, but they may stimulate some of you or some of your students to improve on these ideas and determine ways to enhance our role in the analysis and resolution of these problems. Unlike the manuscripts of the editor I mentioned, I have a vision of a better future, a vision that transcends the boundaries of our disciplines and nations and that includes our collective scholarship in making this a better world. Will you join IAICS and me in this challenge?

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