

## **Review of *Intercultural Communication: An Interdisciplinary Approach: When Neurons, Genes, and Evolution Joined the Discourse***

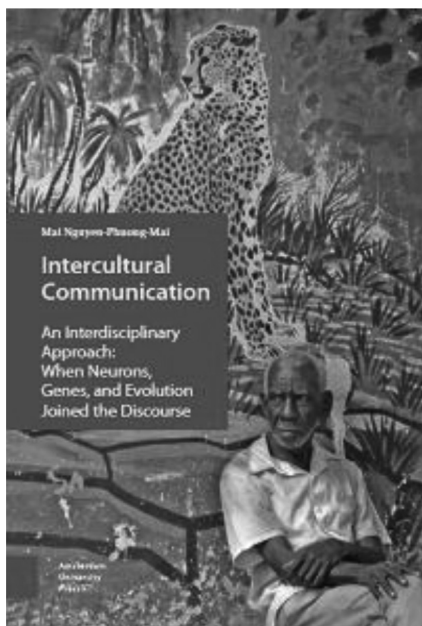
### **Book:**

Nguyen-Phuong-Mai Mai. (2017). *Intercultural communication: An interdisciplinary approach: When neurons, genes, and evolution joined the discourse*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. (376pp.) ISBN: 978-94-6298-541-4

Reviewed by

George F. SIMONS

Courage is perhaps the word that quickest comes to mind when I reflect on the work and activities of Nguyen-Phuong-Mai Mai. Having made her way through the Arab world, a woman alone on a wandering sabbatical, she now undertakes a no less courageous attempt at refreshing our intercultural perspectives and understanding in the light of contemporary research and discoveries in genetics, neuroscience, and human development. She provides up-to-date, readable Aha's for professionals and students alike as she reveals culture with fresh holistic insights in the make-up and interaction of individuals and their communities.



This is a hefty volume but you do not notice its weight because it is so attractively written, avoiding multisyllabic academic textbook jargon while closely re-examining the various areas of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that belong to developing cultural competence. From a cursory view of the topics, one might be tempted to say, “same old, same old”, but this is not the case, as the actual treatment is refreshed in the light cast on each subject “when neurons, genes, and evolution join the discourse.” Our perception of how community, time, hierarchy, language, etiquette, kinesics, and contexts function are deepened by this joining. We learn to better sort out our differences and commonalities while recognizing both flexibility for cultural acquisition and the dynamics that may limit our adaptation to the cultures we encounter. The text is punctuated with real life images, visually supporting the textual commentary.

There is a significant section dedicated to the area of bias, prejudice and stereotypes, issues that will be very familiar to those involved in intercultural and diversity work, but taken to a new level of clarity in the new understandings of

the mental functions at work. It thus results in fresh strategies for “training the brain” to address these challenges.

Section 4 is titled “Non-verbal Communication: How you Make Them Feel.” I object to this line, and don’t think I alone hold the pet peeve of seeing statements like, “You make me feel...”, so common in diversity work, implying that other’s feelings are the results of our words and behaviors. True, others react to what they see us do and say, however, the same automatic mechanisms at work here are discussed in the section on bias in this book. What others see us saying doing and how we look may trigger the knee-jerk reactions in their perceptual frameworks, but one of the most important points of this book is that we are each ultimately responsible for how we choose to frame our perceptions and release those emotions that belong to them in reaction to our experience of others – that is the whole point of what neuroscience is now telling us. You do not “make me feel...”, “I make me feel...!” Tolerance is not just the acceptance of difference without giving offense, but also the ability to avoid taking offense. It is part of cultural competence to master our thoughts and feelings when we are on the receiving end of what is normally unintended discomfort caused by the words and behaviors of others.

*Intercultural Communication* certainly offers us an up-to-date textbook providing not only theoretical reflection, but also activities and case studies that stimulate thought and reinterpretation of the many aspects of culture that we have long been discussing. Detailed summaries conclude the major sections and provide an excellent review of what has been introduced and discussed.

Fresh air rustles through the leaves of the tree of culture as the pages turn. The expression, “tree of culture” is not just this reviewer’s purple patch, but a core model which the author uses to illustrate the organic development of culture from its roots to the greening of its leaves. Hopefully this book is a harbinger of a new springtime for the intercultural field.

## Reviewer Note

Dr. George Simons, consultant, trainer and lecturer created the award-winning diversophy® game for developing intercultural competence for training programs and online learning ([www.diversophy.com](http://www.diversophy.com)). He authored and edited *EuroDiversity: A Business Guide to Managing Difference*, addressing EU cultural challenges. He is co-author of *Putting Diversity to Work*, *Seven Ways to Lighten Your Life before You Kick the Bucket*, and of eight Cultural Detective® intercultural guides. Currently he is focused on developing tools and expertise for the acculturation of migrants and local communities to each other. Articles, reviews and other publications by George Simons are available at [www.georgesimons.com](http://www.georgesimons.com). He has been a regular lecturer at ESPEME, JAMK and Skema and has served on the governing boards of SIETAR Europa and SIETAR France.