

Editorial: Qualitative Research and Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: This article introduces to the thematic scope and the articles of this special issue and it explains some important terminological distinctions of the intercultural research field. The overall aim of this issue is to explore the manifold ways to apply and to reflect upon qualitative research methods in the context of intercultural communication. This implies both a discussion of genuine characteristics of intercultural qualitative research as well as attempts to identify common features and linkages of this special area with more general interpretative research traditions under the "umbrella" of qualitative social research.

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1. Introduction

Interculturality and cultural practices shape and pervade social institutions like politics, business, education, media, and science, as well as everyday life in private settings and encounters. Over the last four decades issues of cross-cultural and intercultural communication have increasingly attracted theoretical and empirical attention in many disciplines. [1]

Myron LUSTIG and Jolene KOESTER (2005) draw a distinction between the "domestic" and the "international imperative" for dealing with intercultural communication academically and practically. The international imperative is mostly concerned with cross-border mobility, e.g. international job assignments, business expatriation, international development services, study abroad programmes for students or international youth exchange. The domestic imperative focuses on the growing influence of ethnic, cultural and social plurality in a wider sense in all areas of increasingly multicultural societies (e.g. in health services, public administration, business, public safety services, and many more). [2]

Basic research on cross-cultural and intercultural communication concentrates on the (empirical) advancement of sophisticated theories of culture and communication—often with an interdisciplinary or even transdisciplinary perspective. Applied research is usually conducted in the realm of practical interventions and programmes to improve and foster intercultural learning and understanding. This type of research is aiming at the verification of evidence and the evaluation of effects and changes that are expected from such interventions. These are just some obvious—yet closely interlinked—points of departure to reflect about interculturality as an emerging research field. [3]

1.1 Some initial clarifications

Many publications use the terms "cross-cultural" and "intercultural" interchangeably but it is important to note that they are conceptually different: "Cross-cultural research [and communication] involve[s] comparing behavior in two or more cultures (...). Intercultural research [and communication] involve[s] examining behavior when members of two or more cultures interact (...)" (GUDYKUNST, 2000, p.314). Therefore, following GUDYKUNST, we also draw this distinction between cross-cultural communication (CCC) and intercultural communication (ICC) as two different but often interlinked foci of research. This FQS special issue deals primarily with intercultural communication and throughout this editorial it will become clear why we emphasise this particular view of culture. However, classical cross-cultural aspects also are included in several papers, as are broader views and purposes of IC research. [4]

While any perspective of intercultural communication inevitably requires *some kind* of distinction of the semantic plurality of "social worlds" (STRAUSS) or "small life-worlds" (LUCKMANN) (cf. SOEFFNER & ZIFONUN, 2008, p.7f.), its theoretical and practical relevance is not restricted to cross-cultural and comparative analysis, or solely problems and options of bridging these "worlds" through communication. Intercultural communication comprises a wider spectrum of social phenomena including:

- the interpretive constitution of social constructs of cultural distinctions, typifications and identifications, as well as the cognitive and social preconditions of such constructs,
- the anticipation as well as the rejection of cultural distinctions as being socially meaningful (or not) for everyday life or for exceptional events (contingencies)
- various forms of constructive and destructive practices of intercultural interaction,
- social power-structures and psycho-emotional constraints which may foster or obstruct intercultural interactions—and can tend to foster cultural hegemony,
- symbolic sedimentations and material manifestations of intercultural communication in the form of cultural worldviews, identities, languages, symbols and artefacts. [5]

These and many other aspects constitute the huge arena of research on intercultural communication, and respectively intercultural communication research. "Research *on* intercultural communication" (RIC) means a study that addresses the "intercultural nature" of observable forms of communication and interaction as its main focus of empirical investigation. We suggest the term "Intercultural communication research" (ICR) to indicate that the process of *doing* communication research is characterised by an "intercultural perspective" itself. [6]

This terminological distinction seems subtle at first but it has far reaching implication as the distinction is rooted in different paradigms of social research.¹ To give an example: A study that uses group discussions to analyse interaction modes of classroom discussions in a multicultural education setting might be considered as research *on* intercultural communication. If the interview-situation between the researcher from culture X and the participants of the study from culture Y is concerned as a communicative process, or if the processes of data collection and data analysis are conducted and reflected by a multicultural team of researchers from different cultural backgrounds in order to reduce cultural bias effects, we might speak of intercultural communication research. This example shows that a truly reflexive research practice should involve both perspectives. [7]

1.2 Qualitative research and intercultural communication

Robust empirical analysis is essential for explanations of the change of social structures and practices within pluralistic societies. Due to its interdisciplinary character, intercultural communication seeks inspiration by theories, models, methods and critique from various corners of the social sciences, cultural studies, humanities and education. Given the general expansion and recognition of qualitative research methods in the social sciences (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2005; FLICK, von KARDORFF & STEINKE, 2004; SILVERMAN, 2006), the interdisciplinary nature of qualitative intercultural communication research generates a wide and rather blurry landscape of theories and methods. [8]

Since the exploration, reconstruction, and translation of the "semantic other" and our own relations to the "other" can be regarded as the very essence of intercultural communication, a close kinship with the epistemological roots of qualitative social research is fairly clear. But the application of qualitative methods and approaches to intercultural communication is by no means "automatic". Researchers in the field of intercultural communication have to elaborate their basic theoretical and methodological assumptions about interculturality explicitly to earn the recognition of a meaningful and evident analytical perspective. Furthermore, methodologies and methods of qualitative research are culturally embedded themselves, depending very much on differing intellectual research traditions in different countries and world regions (CISNEROS PUEBLA , DOMÍNGUEZ FIGAREDO, FAUX, KÖLBL & PACKER, 2006; FLICK, 2005;

1 Unfortunately, most of the published literature uses only the (handier) term intercultural communication research, despite the fact that the methods and methodology of many studies immediately reveal that there is no attempt to reach an intercultural perspective in the research process beyond bluntly ascribed cultural difference of the "objects" under investigation.

KNOBLAUCH, FLICK & MAEDER, 2005). The process of intercultural communication research must be considered as a special mode of cultural practice in its own right. [9]

This thematic issue of *FQS* is aiming at the exploration of the use and reflection of qualitative research approaches in the context of intercultural communication. Several good introductions into the field of intercultural communication came out recently and all of them include some sections about research methods (ASANTE, YOSHITAKE & YIN, 2008; KOTTHOFF & SPENCER-OATEY, 2007; STRAUB, WEIDEMANN & WEIDEMANN, 2007). Various methodological aspects are highlighted in these handbooks, in more or less detailed ways. However, the purpose of this thematic issue of *FQS* is to connect and continue the discourse by addressing following questions:

- How do researchers conceptualise culture and how does it manifest itself in the application of qualitative research methods? How is culture conceived in the theories in use and how does this fit into larger theoretical frameworks?
- How are qualitative methods legitimated, founded theoretically and adjusted to intercultural phenomena?
- How are mixed methods and interdisciplinary approaches applied in intercultural communication research?
- How can the relatively young research field of intercultural communication be systematised and mapped on the background of classical approaches of qualitative social research?
- How can researchers anticipate and reflect the cultural bias of their theoretical concepts, field access, instruments, interpretation and data presentation throughout the research process? [10]

Focusing on these guiding questions, the editors followed the editorial tradition of *FQS*. We tried to include a maximum of variation of approaches, disciplines, and arguments. The call for papers was launched in April 2007 and we received more than 50 proposals. Of these, 34 papers were invited for review. Finally, this thematic issue comprises of 25 articles; several of them are available as full versions in two languages. All authors were asked to put special emphasis on the reflexivity in the process of researching intercultural communication. Therefore, reflecting the inherent problems of ethnocentrism, cultural bias, and the researchers' role in the research process are crucial aspects of all papers (although they are of different centrality). [11]

The articles of the special issue are organised in three thematic clusters which are outlined briefly:

1. Theoretical reflections on conceptualising intercultural communication
2. Application, innovation, reflection and training of qualitative research methods
3. Researching special themes and contexts with qualitative approaches [12]

2. Themes and Clusters of the Special Issue

2.1 Theoretical reflections on conceptualising intercultural communication

A first sub-section of six conceptual papers provides an overview of theoretical and methodological problems on how to conceptualise culture and intercultural communication for empirical investigation. The focus is on aspects that are—for the most part— independent from specific research methods, disciplines or a special setting. In other words, these papers "set the scene" and may serve as introductions to the state of the art—some of them also employ short vignettes of research examples to illustrate their underlying argumentation. [13]

The first article by [Matthias OTTEN and Judith GEPPERT](#) suggests a metaphorical approach to systematise the long-term developments of the methodological landscape of qualitative research on intercultural communication. Three methodological dimensions (cultural concepts, methods of analysis, generalisations) constitute a *hitchhiker's guide to the intercultural galaxy* that may be used to explore this FQS special issue further. [Maria Assumpta ANEAS and Maria Paz SANDÍN](#) review the historical development of the intercultural research field followed by an outline of the methodical consequences of a social constructivist's view on culture. [Dominic BUSCH](#), in his paper, analyses the specific notions of culture that are embedded in linguistic approaches such as contrastive pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, ethnomethodology, as well as discourse analysis. Newcomers to the field of intercultural communication may find this article helpful to learn more about these classic positions in intercultural communication. [Ester BARINAGA](#) also enters the field from a linguistic perspective and discusses WITTGENSTEIN's take on language to demonstrate the consequences for the study of culture applying a performative view of language. Problems and epistemic limitations of understanding other cultures are addressed in [Norbert SCHRÖER](#)'s article which also introduces to a methodologically controlled approach of interpretation based on the influential tradition of hermeneutic sociology of knowledge. The last article of this first section by [Gertraud KOCH](#) explores how a paradigm of culture as knowledge, as it has been discussed in recent cultural anthropology, could contribute to a new and more critical understanding of intercultural communication and competence in general. [14]

2.2 Application, innovation, reflection and training of qualitative methods

The second thematic cluster comprises ten articles. The authors of this section explain, demonstrate and reflect specific research methods, instruments and approaches (or a combination of several methods) used to analyse intercultural communication. The overall aim of this sub-section is to show the great variety of conceptual foundations of specific methods for data collection and data analysis, grounded in different research traditions and disciplines of the social and cultural sciences. A closer look on the methods and their special emphasis also reveals the great amount of exchange and cross disciplinary influx among the disciplines. While, for example, sociologists may find stimulation from e.g. post-colonial

literature studies, psychologists borrow much of their current "intercultural baggage" (PHIPPS, 2007) from classic cultural anthropology—and forward it to educational scientists, and so on. [15]

[Jan KRUSE](#) opens the second sub-section with a salute to Alfred SCHÜTZ and his social phenomenology, and examines one of the most fundamental problems of intercultural communication research: The insurmountable limitations of gaining access to the inner life-worlds of others in the act of interpersonal understanding. It follows an article by [Andrea PLODER](#) who advocates the application of *post-colonial theory* to intercultural communication, that is to say, maintaining a fundamental sensitivity for irritations as a starting point for intercultural communication research. [Arne WEIDEMANN](#) then introduces his sophisticated approach called *pragma-semantic analysis* to reconstruct networks of cultural meaning attached to social practice—in his example the tourist's view of Indian beggars. [16]

[Sheila TRAHAR](#) is the first of several authors in this special issue to use international (higher) education as a prominent context to reflect upon methods of intercultural research. TRAHAR's critical assessment of the *narrative inquiry paradigm* reveals some challenges of autoethnography. Also rooted in an educational context, [Henrike EVERS](#) presents her attempt to employ the *documentary method* (BOHNSACK) to reconstruct the educational impacts of facilitated study abroad activities. [Doris WEIDEMANN](#) shows the rich potential of the *structure formation technique* that she uses to analyse subjective theories about giving and losing "face" and subsequent intercultural learning processes. One of the most popular research methods for intercultural communication analysis—the *critical incident technique* (FLANAGAN)—is presented in a modified and extended version by [Gundula Gwenn HILLER](#). [17]

The following three papers emphasise the importance of training, learning and reflection of qualitative research methods in an intercultural context. [David HOFFMAN](#)'s article reflects upon the *communicative preferences* that participants usually have regarding the *types of interaction* associated with different research and interview methods. His *incremental interview approach protocol* seeks to sensitise researchers and research students to this aspect of data collection. [Gabriele BERKENBUSCH](#) presents insights of her own hands-on experiences taken from a teaching project which combines initial intercultural learning in bicultural tandems and the practical introduction to *conversation analysis*. The final contribution in this cluster comes from a authors group—[Carmen OLIVER VERA](#), [Conchi SAN MARTIN MARTÍNEZ](#), [M^a Isabel NAVARRO RUIZ](#) and [Graça COSTA DOS SANTOS](#). They share their experiences of a collaborative research group that seeks to combine intercultural education services for immigrant students with training in applied educational research for doctoral students at the University of Barcelona. [18]

2.3 Researching special themes, phenomena, and contexts with qualitative approaches

Nine articles in the third sub-section are dedicated to examples and case studies which address specific themes or contexts of intercultural communication. Evidently, migration, international business, media and education—to name just a few areas—are leading to a ubiquitous interculturality in modern societies. The examples of special contexts to be studied with an intercultural perspective are manifold and diverse. In this *FQS* special issue these articles underline and illustrate the wide scope of highly contextualised approaches to intercultural research. [19]

Migration processes and identity issues are obviously main inducements to study intercultural communication ("domestic imperative", cited above) and in this sense our special issue connects with several debates and topics of a former *FQS* thematic issue on *Qualitative Migration Research in Contemporary Europe* (BORKERT, MARTÍN PÉREZ, SCOTT & De TONA, 2006). [Vera SHERIDAN and Katharina STORCH](#) consider a *grounded theory* approach as particularly suitable for disentangling complex interlinkings within migration experiences and their individual outcomes. [Bogusia TEMPLE and Katarzyna KOTERBA](#) focus on language as a nontrivial form of cultural representation of migrants. They present results of their *sociolinguistic research* with Polish speakers in Greater Manchester, England which suggest that people may present themselves differently in different languages, depending on the context of language use. [Marc THIELEN](#) analyses the contextual influence of a strictly regulated German asylum life situation of homosexual Iranians on their autobiographical narratives. [20]

There is no need for allusions to the world-wide web, the "global village", or the global spreading of Bollywood movies to justify the paramount impact that media has on cultural identity and the way communication is often conceived as intercultural. Three articles deal with mediated forms of intercultural communication. [Will GIBSON](#) employs *conversation analysis* to explore how membership categorisation is negotiated through online-communication, and in how far this type of communication differs from face-to-face communication. [Vincenzo BUA](#) presents the research results and the advantages of the GABEK method that he used to investigate the intercultural aspects of the perception of a regional brand picture "Südtirol/Alto Adige". [Andreas HEPP](#) takes on board a transcultural perspective for comparative media studies, which he finds more appropriate than the classic international comparative view. [21]

The last three papers of the special issue may represent the intersections of intercultural and cross-cultural communication. [Jasmin MAHADEVAN](#) presents the results of an ethnographic field work in an organisation and in doing so, argues that an emic perspective may be most useful in international organisational cultural research. [Ulrike SCHWEGLER](#) also refers to the emic-etic distinction and compares both perspectives in their consequences for researching trust in professional intercultural relations. [Elisabeth SCHILLING and Alexander KOZIN](#) close this special issue by going back to the very beginning of intercultural

communication: to Edward T HALL's concept of time (dating back to the late 1950's) which is revisited through an empirical and comparative study on time concepts among Russians and Germans. [22]

2.4 ... and what is missed in this special issue

We are aware of the fact that the selection of articles in this issue is not representative. Many methods and approaches are not included and the themes and contexts presented are only examples. Some views and regions are still underrepresented and we have to confess, that the international scope of perspectives represented here is not as broad as we had hoped for in the beginning of the project. This is particularly unfortunate since the topic of intercultural communication is particularly requested to include "other" and "international" perspectives. Also we are lacking contributions from Asian, African and Latin American authors who surely would open our eyes wider for some shortcomings inherent to the so called "western" tradition of intercultural communication (ASANTE, 2008; YOSHITAKA, 2008).² [23]

In terms of methods and data-formats represented in this issue, text-based data (interviews) outweighs studies that apply visual data as means of intercultural communication. However, the renaissance of visual data (see FQS thematic issue 9, No.3, KNOBLAUCH, BAER, LAURIER, PETSCHKE & SCHNETTLER, 2008) and virtual ethnography (see FQS thematic issue 8, No.3, DOMÍNGUEZ et al., 2007) are definitely to be considered very important for the future of qualitative intercultural communication research as well. [24]

MRUCK, CISNEROS-PUEBLA and FAUX (2005) raised the challenge of balancing the centre and peripheries of doing qualitative research remarking:

"We need to know more about what is happening in the different (national, disciplinary, medial) 'peripheries' to learn about the conceptual roots of our current practices and to act in a future globalized academia, opening our minds to the fascinating diversity (and unity?) of our memories, images, styles, focus, strategies and life-worlds as qualitative researchers." (MRUCK et al., 2005, par.9) [25]

Our attempt of a thematic issue on intercultural communication can provide a starting point for a profound debate on qualitative methods in this field, and readers might decide themselves if such approaches represent the center or just a remote corner of the "galaxy". We hope that the contributions in this issue will encourage others to respond and to "expand" the current scope in a critical manner. [26]

² We recommend the *Global Intercultural Communication Reader* (ASANTE, YOSHITAKE & YIN, 2008) for additional reading to get familiar with "non-western" concepts and views.

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