Intercultural and Cross-Cultural Communication Research: Some Reflections about Culture and Qualitative Methods

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Abstract: This article attempts to offer a response, from a general perspective, to the question of how culture reveals itself in the application of qualitative research methods in intercultural communication. When we use the term "culture" it is important to bear in mind that culturally attributed social interaction processes are themselves the result of socially constructed processes. They are part of an individual-collective dialectic with multiple potential meanings, which are emergent and in constant reformulation from a wide variety of social and cultural perspectives. Much of the recent research in intercultural communication has been directed towards the study of these systems of culturally related meanings. The literature we review offers perspectives from a variety of disciplines and insights into the role of culture in communication processes.

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1. Introduction

In this article we will address the question of how culture is conceptualized and manifests itself in the application of qualitative methodology. With this objective we attempt to summaries contributions from the field of intercultural and cross-cultural communication which we feel may be of help in moving towards the necessary conceptualization. It is also hoped that the arguments here reviewed will enable us to analyze, from a general perspective, the relationship between culture and some of the most significant components of qualitative research. [1]

First, the role of culture in intercultural communication is examined. We offer a concise presentation of the history of cross-cultural and intercultural communication as a research field, and then continue by offering an outline of the basic idea of culture as it is applied in studies of intercultural communication. We introduce to some approaches which are currently used in studying culture. Then we outline how cultural research and qualitative research intersect conceptually. [2]

The next section, which is dedicated to the analysis of empirical reality in qualitative research, is mainly focused on the role played by culture in the information gathering process. In particular, and using a very generic approach, some theoretical contributions are presented which illustrate the role that culture plays in determining the content of the information which is assembled, the interpersonal climate which is established, and the language through which the world of facts is approached. The section does not examine specific techniques or strategies but rather it identifies some elements which may influence the way culture enters and influences the research process. The section also includes the relation between culture and the processes of analyzing and interpreting reality, and offers a brief summary of some of the principal theoretical approaches applied for analyzing culture and their backflow on the research practice in an intercultural context. [3]

At this point we would like to emphasize the necessarily generic character of the present work, since the complexity and the theoretical richness which underlie the concepts "culture" and "qualitative research" would really justify the writing of a separate article for each of the sections we present here. Thus, accepting the risk of offering, at times, what some might consider a rather superficial account, we have tried to outline a more general framework from which the conceptualization of culture and its relations with the process of qualitative research in the context of intercultural communication may be addressed. [4]

2. The Role of Culture in Researching Intercultural Communication

2.1 A brief history of the field of intercultural communication research

Intercultural communication is a scientific field whose object of interest is the interaction between individuals and groups from different cultures, and which examines the influence of culture on who people are, how they act, feel, think and, evidently, speak and listen (DODD, 1991). As described by VILA (2005), intercultural communication may be defined as a communicative process involving individuals from reference cultures which are sufficiently different to be perceived as such, with certain personal and/or contextual barriers having to be overcome in order to achieve effective communication. Even if the origins of the study of intercultural communication can be situated in the years following the end of World War II, and coincide with the creation of the United Nations (1945), it is generally accepted that Edward T. HALL (1959) was the first to use the term itself.[1] Most of the work which was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s was very

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1 See also the paper of OTTEN and GEPPERT (2009) in this special issue.

much under HALL's influence, together with that of KLUCKHOHN and
STRODTBECK (1961). During the 1970s the field flourished, and the most
notable works were possibly that of CONDON and YOUSEF (1977), as well as
SAMOVAR, PORTER and JAIN (1981) who were the first researchers to
systematize the area of investigation. During the 1980s and 1990s publications
were focused on deepening the outreach of theory and on refining the applied
methodology (CHEN & STAROSTA, 1998). [5]

LOMAS, OSORIO and TUSÓN (1993) divided the various areas of study
(together with the pertinent theoretical contributions) into four blocks:

1. the analysis of the communicative process—among the most significant
    contributions here are the work of GUDYKUNST (1989, 1992, 1993,1994),
    KIM (1977, 1988, 1992) and CASMIR (1991,1993, 1999);
2. the role of language in intercultural communication—here the work of
    WITTGENSTEIN (1953) and DODD (1991) are seminal;
3. the cognitive organization of the communication process—stimulated by
    CHOMSKY (1957,1968), FODOR (1986) and VYGOTSKY (1977, 1979); and
4. the development of interpersonal relations, which includes contributions from
    authors like ALTMAN and TAYLOR (1973) and TING-TOOMEY (1984, 1999). [6]

The influence of quantitative methodologies on studies about intercultural
communication was hegemonic until the 1990s, when the publication of the
journal "International and Intercultural Communication Annual" began to promote
methodological pluralism, opening the doors to the use of qualitative
methodology. [7]

2.2 Culture as applied to cross-cultural and intercultural communication

There have been numerous attempts to define the meaning of the term culture
following the classic proposal of TAYLOR in 1871. But, as GUDYKUNST and
TING-TOOMEY (1988, p.27) point out, "no consensus has been achieved when it
comes to formulating an interdisciplinary definition which can be accepted across
the diverse fields of study." The sociologist PEDERSEN (1997, p.159) also
illustrated the difficulty in defining culture when, following an extensive literature
survey he states "[p]eople use culture in the same way as scientists use
paradigms (...) to organize and normalize their activity (...), the elements of
culture are used, modified or discarded depending on their utility in organizing
reality." [8]

KEESING (1974), using an anthropological approach, was able to distinguish
between two main currents: one which considers culture as an adaptive system,
and a second one, which treats culture as a symbolic system. Given that both
approaches, when taken separately, present serious limitations when it comes to
capturing the complex situations which can be found in the context of cross-
cultural and intercultural communication, authors like ADLER (1975), KIM (1988)
or PEDERSEN (1994) have proposed the use of an interactive approach wherein

they define culture as the universe of information that configures the patterns of life in any given society. [9]

FRENCH and BELL (1979) in their classic "Iceberg Model" identify the behavioral, cognitive and emotional components of culture, and these include values, conceptual systems, behavior and both material and symbolic artifacts. On this base, ANEAS (2003, p.120) synthesized as a definition of culture "the set of knowledge, values, emotional heritage, behavior and artifacts which a social group share, and which enable them to functionally adapt to their surroundings." Thus culture affects us in the way we interact with our environment, influencing both how we construct it, and how we understand it. [10]

Clearly the construct "culture" is one which is under continuous modification in the different disciplines in which it is deployed, and especially when it is applied in the context of the processes of globalization and diversity which characterize modern societies. We can, however, identify two main approaches to the use of the term:

1. a traditional conception, which embodies a more popular and static approach and identifies culture with a group of "products" (knowledge, skills, ...) that a community has generated historically, (the "expressive" culture), and

2. an extensive and instrumental conception (the way of being of a community, the conceptual model in which the world is interpreted and the culture is situated) which incorporates a more dynamic use of the term. [11]

The first conception leads back to a series of concepts which have a more "quantitative" interpretation, in that they serve as a synonym for acquired knowledge. Tacitly this leads us back to the idea of culture as something that people "possess," and to considering it as a static "given" whose development is seen as linear and progressive, with outputs which can be expressed in terms of accumulation. Such conceptualization can lead to a process of stereotyping of cultural traits where the "other" is characterized in terms of the most trivial and superficial elements. From this cumulative and static perspective a hierarchic conception of the relation between cultures (based, for example, on social prestige and/or power) is sometimes deduced. [12]

The second conception could be described as being more complex given that it incorporates more dimensions. It understands the term culture as the instrument by means of which we relate to the world and interpret it. According to this view, culture is not something which we "possess"; rather cultures form an inherent part of the person, and it is culture which bestows individual and collective identity: a complex identity which is articulated across multiple social belongings. It is, then, a mechanism for understanding and interpreting the world which acquires instrumental, adaptive and regulatory meaning. [13]

As a consequence we need to recognize that the classes of social interaction which are examined in studies of cross-cultural and intercultural communication are the result of a socially constructed process, and form part of an individual-

collective dialectic, possessing inherently multiple meanings. The meanings produced are constantly being modified and reformulated, and are the emergent product of the perpetual interaction of many cultural perspectives and social situations. It is to these systems, processes and schemas that large parts of the qualitative research efforts in intercultural communication have been directed in an attempt to understand and interpret the diverse cultural practices and representations which can be identified. Finally, we should never forget the social, political and economic context that determines how differences are valued. Interpreting such interaction processes should also be considered as a priority activity in studies of cross-cultural and intercultural communication. Thus, even if it is accepted that culture gives meaning to reality and to the existence of differences in attitudinal, affective and behavioral patterns between different cultural groups, as has been systematically documented in works which are now classics like *Man and Culture* of Ruth BENEDICT (1967), it is nonetheless true that belonging to a group does not mean, always and necessarily, the automatic presence of one or another form of behavior or pattern of communicative interaction. We need to bear in mind, then, that another of the characteristics of "culture" is that it is differentially distributed, and that not all the members of a given cultural group adopt, live or reflect their common culture in an identical way in every moment and life circumstance, nor do all members of the same group demonstrate the same feeling of identification. Viewing cultures in this way would rapidly lead us to adopt the most simplistic of cultural stereotypes, or fall into what STANFIELD (1993, p.21) calls "the fallacy of the monolithic identity" which consists in failing to recognize that differential identities exist among the members of any group. [14]

2.3 Conceptual approaches to the study of culture

According to TRIANDIS (2000), research that studies culture and, more specifically, cross-cultural and intercultural communication in its various forms and social contexts, can approach the theoretical foundations and methodological design of their work from three different perspectives: the indigenous one, the cultural one and the cross-cultural one.

1. The *"indigenous" approach* focuses on the meaning of concepts in a culture and how such meaning may change across demographics within a given culture context. The focus of such studies is the development of knowledge tailored to a specific culture without any special claims to generality beyond the confines of that particular cultural context. The main challenge with the indigenous approach is the difficulty involved in trying to avoid the influence of pre-given concepts, theories and methodologies and therefore the difficulty of determining what the term indigenous (ADAMOPOLOUS & LONNER, 2001) really means in any given culture.

2. The *"cultural" approach* is used to describe those studies which make special use of ethnographic methods. More traditional experimental methods can also be used in conjunction within this approach. Here again the meanings of constructs in a culture are the main focus of attention and there is little of

direct comparison of constructs across cultures. The aim is to advance the
understanding of the individual in a sociocultural context and to emphasize the
importance of culture in understanding his or her behavior. The challenge with
this approach is a lack of a widely accepted research methodology
(ADAMOPOLOUS & LONNER, 2001).

3. TRIANDIS (2000) states that, when using *"cross-cultural" approaches*, studies
obtain data in two or more cultures making the assumption that the constructs
under investigation are universals which exist in all of the cultures studied.
One positive point about this approach is that it purports to offer an increased
understanding of the cross-cultural validity and generalizability of the theories
and constructs under investigation. The main challenge, however, comes from
the need to demonstrate the equivalence of the constructs and measures
used, and to minimize the evident biases that may threaten valid cross-cultural
comparisons (ADAMOPOLOUS & LONNER, 2001). Thus not only does the
researcher conceptualize and operationalize, but also, and in addition, the
differential factor is taken into account, that is to say, the way in which one
and the same construct functions in a variety of different cultures. [15]

Indigenous and cultural approaches focus on *emics,* or the things which are
unique to a given culture (ÆGISDÓTTIR, GERSTEIN & CANEL, 2008, p.190).
These approaches are relativistic in that their aim is the in-depth study of the local
context and the meaning of constructs without imposing *a priori* definitions on the
constructs themselves (TANAKA-MATSUMI, 2001). [16]

Scholars working within these approaches usually reject claims that the theories
they work with are universal. On the other hand, in the cross-cultural approach
the focus is on *etics*, or factors that are universal across cultures (BRISLIN,
LONNER & THORNDIKE, 1973). Here the goal is to understand similarities and
differences across cultures, and the comparability of cross-cultural categories or
dimensions is emphasized (TANAKA-MATSUMI, 2001). Summing up, *emics*
focus on "the native's point of view"; *etics* focus on the "comparative cross-
cultural point of view." *Emics* and *etics* are perhaps the two most crucial
constructs in the study of culture (BHAWUK & TRIANDIS, 1996, p.23).[2]
TRIANDIS' classification, and the references to "emic" and "etic" questions
remind us that "MALINOWSKI's dilemma" is still as valid today as it ever was,
and that the tensions between "cultural specificities" and "universal-general"
continue to remain a challenge for the qualitative approach, and an even greater
one, if that is possible, in the area of cross-cultural communication. [17]

Having presented the conceptualization of culture in studies of cross-cultural
communication, and examined how the issue of culture is handled in these
studies we will now pass on to another key aspect of the relationship between
culture and qualitative research into cross cultural communication, and that is
how culture makes its presence felt in the process of qualitative research. [18]

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2   See also the articles of <u>BUSCH</u> (2009), <u>MAHADEVAN</u> (2009) and <u>SCHWEGLER</u> (2009) in this
     special issue for further reflections on emics and etics.

2.4 Culture and qualitative research

There is more to qualitative research than simply applying a given method to the assembly and analysis of information. Behind any decision to apply a given methodology lies a series of epistemological and theoretical presuppositions which sustain and orient the whole research process. Such presuppositions range from the underlying conception of reality, to the nature of knowledge itself, to the questions to be studied and to the various methods to be applied. For this reason GUBA and LINCOLN (1994) describe qualitative research as being not only a set of interpretative research techniques but also a discursive space, or meta-theoretical discourse. [19]

Despite the difficulty involved in formulating a consensually grounded set of general characteristics to define qualitative research, the contributions of SILVERMAN (1997) and LINCOLN and DENZIN (2000) offer a good starting point for examining the interests which impregnate the qualitative research approaches and help to see the influence of the culture within qualitative research process. [20]

According to SILVERMAN (1997, p.1) "[i]t is necessary to expand our conception of qualitative investigation beyond questions related with subjective meaning and broaden research towards dimensions related to language, representation and social organization." And LINCOLN and DENZIN argue (2000, p.1048):

> "At the present time, research is though of as being a moral act, or a moral discourse, which leads us towards a dialogue about ethics, vulnerability and truth. The human and social sciences have been converted into a space where it is possible to converse in a critical fashion about democracy, race, gender, class, nation, liberty and community." [21]

These characterizations of qualitative research move us towards the methodological terrain in which research into cross-cultural and intercultural communication can develop, and there we find a number of key elements to consider. [22]

The attention that qualitative research devotes to *context* reminds us that human experience takes place in very clearly delineated social spaces, in such a way that events and phenomena cannot be adequately understood if they are separated from those spaces. This is why the qualitative researcher focuses his or her attention on natural contexts, trying to remain as faithful as possible to those contexts. The "contexts" in which qualitative research develops should not be considered, however, as "acultural" space. Culture, explicitly or implicitly impregnates the events, experiences, and attitudes that form the object of the research. [23]

Experience is approached in an overall and holistic way, and the person is not seen as simply the sum of a collection of discrete and separate parts. [24]

The researcher play a fundamental role of the in the process of information gathering and data analysis. That is, in qualitative studies the investigator is constituted as the principal instrument in the process of information gathering, in interaction with reality.

> "Researchers need to observe what they have before them, forming a reference structure and a set of intentions. The I is the instrument which unifies the situation and bestows meaning on it (...). Knowing what to exclude involves having a sense of what is, and what isn't, significant, and having a structure which makes the search for significance efficient" (EISNER, 1998, p.50). [25]

This question implies a special competence on the part of the researcher for addressing questions of sensitivity and perception and is also closely related with the researcher's own culture, which determines what she or he sees, and serves as a filter for interpretation. [26]

Another characteristic of qualitative studies is their interpretative character. EISNER (1998) highlights the fact that interpretation has two meanings. On the one hand the qualitative researcher tries to justify, elaborate or integrate the research results within a given theoretical framework. On the other, the researcher wants the participants in the study to speak for themselves, and to approach their singular experience through the meanings and the vision of the world they possess by offering what GEERTZ (1987) calls "dense description," and this is, in its turn, impregnated with their culture. [27]

In addition to the above characteristics, interest has grown in questions related to power, control, and the construction, interpretation and representation of reality, the legitimacy of texts and the role of class, race, gender and ethnicity in research processes. As a consequence of this, another fundamental characteristic feature of qualitative research has emerged: reflexivity. Reflexivity implies paying attention to the diverse linguistic, social, cultural, political and technical elements which influence in an overall fashion the process of knowledge development (interpretation) in the language and narrative (forms and presentation) and impregnate the production of texts (authority and legitimacy). This also involves paying attention to the individual being studied, recognizing the theoretical and personal assumptions which enter into his or her actions, as well as the relation with the other participants and the community in which the study is carried out (SANDÍN, 2003). That is what is involved is making visible and explicit, among other factors, the role of culture, and its influence in the process and outcome of the study. Thus the close relationship which exists between culture and qualitative research should be clear, both from the perspective of the researcher and from the reality being studied (subjects, institutions, contexts, etc.). [28]

3. Methodical Challenges in Researching Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication

Citing the view of BHAWUK and TRIANDIS (1996, p.31), the appropriate methodology to apply in any given study into cross-cultural and intercultural communication depends on the actual problem which is being investigated, on the knowledge available to the researchers, on the degree of acceptance by those being studied of the techniques used in the study, among many other factors. These authors recommend *emic* approaches such as ethnographic techniques, systematic observations, content analysis, and in-depth interviews when commencing a study in culturally unknown scenarios with the objective of coming to know this reality either in depth or from a holistic but unique perspective. When there is an interest in generalizing the results or in facilitating possible comparisons between the works in hand and other similar research, it is desirable, according to BHAWUK and TRIANDIS (1996), to use *etic* approaches in which mixed or exclusively quantitative methods are employed. That is, it would seem to be the case that in carrying out qualitative research the use of *emic* type approaches is more appropriate. But this should not be taken to mean that such research may not include recourse to an objective instrument or the incorporation of a component more typically associated with *etic* type approaches. [29]

In terms of the *information gathering process* it should be pointed out that the researcher needs to keep constantly in mind the diversity of the elements in which culture can manifest itself. In this sense the question of the extent to which culture influences the approach, development and outcome of the information gathering process needs to be asked. In order to offer a concise response to this question we would refer to contemporary epistemological arguments. In general it is not accepted that scientific knowledge reflects and describes the reality of an object in and of itself, and that the object can be identified and grasped in a value free way (CHALMERS, 1982). That is, an interpretative epistemology assumes the presence of culture, among other factors, in the activities and processes which form part of the approach to empirical reality. Today it is widely accepted that it is an error to imagine that observational evidence enters our field of perception in a way which is totally independent of the theoretical interpretation which is applied to it. Theories about culture offer us important indications about the potential influence of culture in the design and application of the differing techniques and strategies used in qualitative research in order to proceed with information gathering. The contributions are diverse both in terms of sources and in indications, so we will try to structure them around four principal axes: the content of the information being gathered, the nature of the interpersonal intercultural relations generated in applying a technique or strategy, and the language in use in the research process. [30]

3.1 Content of the information being gathered

BHAWUK and TRIANDIS (1996, p.29) offer an interesting collection of insights and recommendations when it comes to the content of interviews. Interviewing is one of the fundamental techniques used in qualitative research on cross-cultural

and intercultural communication. One of the principal concerns when conducting an interview is whether an emic or an etic approach is more appropriate—that is, whether to ask different, tailor-made and culture-specific questions or ask the same questions in all the cultural contexts being studied. If the same questions are to be used, researches should avoid emic concepts. It is often useful to use random probes. One should also examine what ideas the respondents have about the interviewer, about the questions themselves, and whether the questions appear to the respondents to be in some way biased are issues are discussed in detail by PAREEK and RAO (1980). [31]

The interviewer's perspective can bias both *what* is observed and *how* it is observed. In this sense BHAWUK and TRIANDIS (1996, p.28) argue that the most frequent errors to be found in cross-cultural research are the result of the reactions of those being observed to the observer, to the encoding system used and to the fact that the definitions of boundaries for behavior were culture-specific. They also recommend the use of multiple observers, encoding systems that have been pre-tested in a variety of cultures and extensive observer training as being likely to reduce such problems. [32]

3.2 The interpersonal intercultural relation climate

In referring to the interpersonal relations which inevitably develop during processes of qualitative research into cross-cultural and intercultural communication there is an extensive body of literature which has examined both the presence and the manifestations of culture. [33]

Psychological factors associated with anxiety and its effects on intercultural relations have been studied by numerous researchers. According to STEPHAN, STEPHAN and GUDYKUNST (1999, p. 613):

> "When individuals who come from different groups interact, they experience in one way or another a certain preoccupation. This preoccupation can be due to the possibility of not being sufficiently able to remain detached, fear of being negatively affected by the encounter, apprehension about being the victim of misunderstanding, confrontation, etc. The anxiety generated by all these possibilities can in and of itself create difficulties for the interview and generate effects which negatively affect the relationship between interviewer and interviewee." [34]

One of the most widely disseminated theories in the context of intercultural processes when viewed from the psychological perspective is the theory of *Anxiety Uncertainty Management* (AUM) developed by GUDYKUNST (1989, 1992, 1993). AUM takes the view that managing the anxiety which is generated by uncertainty is a process which exerts a fundamental influence on the efficacy of communication and intercultural competence. This theory was initially developed by BERGER and CALABRESE (1975) in their *Uncertainty Reduction Theory* (URT). The most important axiom in this theory holds that:

> "Uncertainty anxiety management has a direct influence on the efficacy of
> communication in interpersonal and intergroup encounters. Individuals can
> communicate effectively to the extent that they are able to manage their anxiety and
> that they feel themselves able to predict the attitudes, feelings and behaviour of the
> interlocutor (or interlocutors) with a certain degree of success" (STEPHAN,
> STEPHAN & GUDYKUNST, 1999, p.614) [35]

What this means is, that when it comes to setting up a qualitative research
process involving study participants from different cultures it is important to be
aware of the anxiety which, even if unconsciously, can affect all those involved.
Such anxiety can place limits on the communicative relations which are produced
and influence the other intellectual and relational processes which are developed
in the research.[3] Thus it is essential to be aware of such potential anxiety, to
anticipate its influence, and to incorporate strategies for reducing its impact, thus
facilitating mutual confidence and making the communication process more
effective. [36]

Symbolic interactionism places considerable emphasis on the importance of
structuring intercultural interaction. It stresses the need for compromise in
initiating the interaction, the role of negotiation throughout the encounter, the
significance of the positions which each of the participants occupies, and the
frameworks or action guidelines they use, and which configure interaction as a
ritual (VILA, 2005, p.55). These contributions are especially necessary in the
development of strategies for contexts where (inter-)cultural interaction is espe-
cially intense and free, as, for example, in the case of ethnographic studies. [37]

DODD (1991) outlined a theory of rhetoric which argues that the first studies in
intercultural communication had their origins in anthropology and rhetoric. This
theory facilitates the analysis not only of individual differences but also of the
properties of the context in which the interaction takes place. This makes it easier
for the researcher to identify those cultural traits and norms that need to be
understood to produce a better intercultural relation. [38]

There are examples of qualitative research where the existence of a good relation
is fundamental. This is the case, for example, in action research. If such action
research is realized in an intercultural context the key role of the relations
between the researcher and the participants of the study is fundamental. The
importance of negotiation, construction, mutual confidence between the various
participants in such transformative processes should constantly be borne in mind.
In order to understand the way in which this kind of relation may develop ATMAN
and TAYLOR (1973) present their theory of *Social Penetration*. It has been an
important reference point for analyzing the interpersonal relations dimension
within the context of relations between different cultures too. This theory holds
that any interpersonal intercultural relation between two or more interlocutors
passes through five distinct development stages: orientation, exploratory
exchanges, affective exchanges, stable exchange and mutual awareness. [39]

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3   See also the article of HOFFMAN (2009) in this special issue, who proposes an incremental
    interview approach protocol to sensitize fort these problems.

3.3 Language in the research process

The role of language is fundamental in cross-cultural and intercultural qualitative research. We would like to give special attention to the mediating role of language in the process. Language is the main medium in which information circulates and it assembles itself as the message transmitter. [40]

In order to understand and interpret utterances or gestures in a given language, a minimum degree of language equivalence between the language of those being studied and that of the researcher is needed (LUSTIG & KOESTER, 1996; SAMOVAR, PORTER & STEFANI, 1998). Clearly situations may easily arise in which the lack of such equivalence is a real barrier to communication and understanding for the research. These barriers extend from simple lexical non-equivalence to an experiential non-equivalence, passing through various other degrees of difficulty. [41]

The references to the role of language which are to be found in DODD's (1991) theory of the coordinated management of meaning and rules are interesting and relevant. DODD's theory holds that all human communication is by its very nature imperfect. For him the objective of communication, in our case the communication which is developed during the research process, is coordination, understood here as a model of interaction between participants. [42]

The theory of cross-cultural communication offers a great heritage of knowledge and resources to identify and understand communicative differences. For example, GUDYKUNST and TING-TOOMEY (1988) or BENNETT (1998) proposed models of communicative cultural styles. As VILA (2005, p.78) points out, differences between verbal styles as well as affecting communication between people of different reference cultures, may also, if ignored, lead to differences in interpretation. LUSTIG and KOESTER (1996) have analyzed non-linear communication. For example, an individual with a circular style may interpret another, who has a more lineal style of discourse, as being simplistic or arrogant, while the latter may view the person with a circular style as illogical or evasive. [43]

Some authors as EKMAN and FRIESEN (1969) or DODD (1991) have analyzed problems of non-verbal gesture in intercultural interaction. In an interview or in a focus group, a look or a gesture, even a smile, may signify something different from one culture to another. In addition to influencing the effectiveness of the process of attributing meaning to such gestures, these differences may also alter the communication climate or influence the development of the research process, given the possibility of reducing confidence, producing doubts, etc. [44]

3.4 Culture, analysis and interpretation in qualitative research

In this section we consider the presence of culture in the cognitive processes of research. These processes include a wide spectrum of intellectual activities: knowing, understanding, comparison, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. To what

extend does culture influence such processes? As ANDERSEN (1993, p.51) suggests discussions of race, class, and gender need to be thoroughly integrated into debates about research process and data analysis. This requires an acknowledgment of the complex, multiple, and contradictory identities and realities that shape our collective experience. [45]

First we will look at some theories and conceptual contributions which can provide orientation. [46]

Contributions from theories that focus on the role of language in cross-cultural communication have been significant in clarifying the part played by culture in the processes of information interpretation (RODRIGO, 1999). The role of WITTGENSTEIN (1953) has been fundamental here, since he was the first who made the decisive break with the traditional separation between language and thought, justifying this move with the argument that language is organized through rules which are based on cultural use.[4] It is precisely this structural organization which gives meaning to gestures and utterances. In this same sense, according ERICKSON (1989), the base for theoretical constructions is the immediate and local meanings of action as defined from the point of view of the social actors involved. In other words, we interpret a reality, a given piece of information according to the parameters of our experience in which our culture occupies a fundamental position. Culture is the reason why a given phenomenon, a specific form of behavior can be given a very different meaning according to the origin culture of the person analyzing and interpreting the process. [47]

With respect to the relation between culture and theories of cognitive organization, the contribution of constructionism to the processes of analysis, interpretation and intellectual creation is worthy of special attention. Among the many contributions of constructionism with special relevance to the relationship with culture we would highlight the construction of mental schemas (COLL, MARCHESI & PALACIOS, 1990). Mental schemas constitute a cognitive system which enables us to interpret the gestures, utterances and actions of others. Culture influences the organization of the schemas developed by individuals with the justification that different visions and interpretations of reality are culturally variable. In the same sense constructionism stresses the importance of socio-cultural background in the higher order psychological processes (VYGOTSKY, 1979) as an argument with which to demonstrate the union of culture with cognitive processes and the relation between learning, development and the contexts of personal relations. [48]

Another contribution to our understanding of the relation between culture and cognitive processes comes from the tradition which studies the influence of roles and stereotypes in the creation of mental schemas and social categorization (CASMIR, 1991). In this sense the process of social categorization favors positive biases for "own-culture" groups and negative biases for groups belonging to other cultures (GUDYKUNST, 1989). Summing up, theories of categorization and

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4   See also the paper of BARINAGA (2009) in this special issue for a discussion of WITTGENSTEIN's role in intercultural communication.

social attribution facilitate the development of explanations concerning the perception and interpretation of the behavior of others in intercultural contexts. [49]

Ethnomethodology, which focuses on the analysis of spontaneous conversation seen as a social activity, considers language as a privileged instrument which gives meaning to a situation. From this point of view reality is not discovered but rather interpreted, constructed, negotiated and maintained through social interaction. This focus suggests analyzing intercultural communicative situations from a constructivist and interpretative perspective. [50]

The work of BHAWUK and TRIANDIS (1996, p.24) focuses on the level of analysis, and suggests that, depending on the objectives being pursued in research into cross cultural communication, it is possible to distinguish two levels of analysis: the *individual* and the *ecological*. The etic-individual studies might include attempts to show the universality of a phenomenon (LONNER, 1980); this might well be the approach which is closest to the positivist methodologies often associated with quantitative methodologies. The emic-individual studies might include studies of subjective culture, such as the ones that established the meaning of the word *philotimo* (VASSILIOU & VASSILIOU, 1973). Etic-ecological studies are holegeistic (whole-world) studies described by NAROLL, MICHIK and NAROLL (1980). The emic-ecological are attempts to show that certain cultures are high and other cultures low on some variable; HOFSTEDE's (1991) study, for example, would fall into this category. [51]

There is thus an extensive literature that attempts to demonstrate the influence of culture in cognitive processes, and extrapolating, in qualitative research. The researcher thinks, interprets and reasons on the basis of her or his cultural points of reference. When faced with one and the same phenomenon two researchers can arrive at opposing conclusions, and culture may be one of the factors which help to explain this kind of situation. Language and mental maps are cultural elements with which the researcher operates in the analysis and the construction of results. [52]

4. Conclusions

In this article we have attempted, from a general perspective, to address the issue of how culture is conceptualized/manifests itself in the application of qualitative research methodology to cross-cultural and intercultural communication. Despite the numerous definitions of culture it can be asserted that the conceptualization applied in cross-cultural and intercultural communication studies is characterized by its complexity, dynamism and intersubjective character, and that in this conceptualization it is possible to identify a multiplicity of components of which the individual is not always aware. It has become clear throughout this article that culture constantly makes its presence felt in the research process, and especially in the context of qualitative research, starting with the theoretical-epistemological foundations of such research, as well as in the process of approaching and generating empirical data and in its analysis and interpretation. In the same way cross-cultural theory has contributed

elements which make such influences more visible, with the result that it has become easier to accept, live with and manage this influence. [53]

The current thematic issue of *FQS* seems to us to constitute an opportunity for the research community to re-examine the way we look at alterity and at the same time to develop research processes which broaden the opportunities for coexistence and social justice in a multicultural world. In the course of this article we have constantly drawn attention to the cultural relevance of social practices, as well as to intercultural communication and its symbolic dimension. Our short review of the theoretical questions which arise in connection with qualitative research as it interacts with the construct "culture" attempts to stress the need to address the substantive areas of intercultural communication and epistemology together. [54]

The fallacy of the monolithic view of identity alerts us to the need for prudence and the importance of avoiding categorizing cultural studies of communication in stereotypical terms, as built on folklore beliefs and essentialist in terms of culture. On the other hand, it is already widely accepted in qualitative research that the researcher becomes the "principal information gathering instrument," and thus some of the objectives which have been identified for studies of cross-cultural and intercultural communication are associated with the reflexivity of the researcher over her or his own cultural biases together with the associated theoretical, and even social and political standpoints. [55]

This also applies to the possibility of learning the meanings of cultural interaction on the basis of transactions between different cultural worlds, symbolic systems, individual and collective cultures. Perhaps the process of renewal of qualitative research methods in the context of cross-cultural and intercultural communication really needs to start with a reflection over the life history of the researcher given that the researcher is also immersed in the norms, values and beliefs of the institutions, communities and movements in which she or he functions, and which give ideological form to the whole process. [56]

For the outlook of researching cross-cultural and intercultural communication we would stress that culture is a "system" and not the sum of a collection of fortuitous traits. It is an integrated whole which cannot be understood by examining its components individually and in isolation. It is a dynamic whole which is in flux, and constantly changing, and which reveals itself as being in interaction with the world in a multiplicity of complex and diverse situations and contexts. Some authors, being conscious of this, have gone so far as to propose the possibility of approaching the study of human communication from the perspective of contemporary chaos theory or from that of the complexity paradigm, a proposal which could well be a task which could be explored in the future. [57]

Acknowledgments

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