

Information-Seeking Behavior in Intercultural and Intergroup Communication

JOHN R. BALDWIN
STEPHEN K. HUNT
Illinois State University

This review essay analyzes the current status of information-seeking research and theory in the field of intercultural communication writ broadly. After drawing distinctions between different types of intercultural communication research (cross-cultural, intercultural, intergroup), the authors discuss how information seeking might be relevant across types and different between types of intercultural communication. Finally, the authors recommend directions for future research.

Information seeking serves as a deep current in the recent tide of intercultural communication textbooks and research articles. There is no doubt that intercultural communication is an ocean tide in our discipline. Almost every content area has admitted the value of considering culture, as authors in these areas explain the processes of communication unique to their areas. The large number of new intercultural texts and the popularity of intercultural interest groups at national conferences testifies to the growth of this area.

Models of intercultural communication clearly reflect the deep current of information seeking. The unspoken core of Samovar and Porter's (1991) model is that, as we receive messages from someone of a different culture, we attribute meaning based on our own culture. Casimir and Asunción-Lande's (1990) third-cultural perspective suggests that two people from distinct cultures create a third culture of shared meanings; we can share meaning only by seeking information from one another. Gudykunst and Kim's (1997) model openly admits the information seeking present in intercultural interaction. They suggest that communication goes through a number of communication filters as communicators try to predict and explain one another's behavior: "By *filters*, we mean

John R. Baldwin (Ph.D., Arizona State University, 1994) is associate professor in the Department of Communication, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, 61790-4480; phone: 309-438-7969, fax: 309-438-3048, email: jrbaldw@ilstu.edu. *Stephen K. Hunt* (Ph.D., Southern Illinois University, 1998) is assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Illinois State University; email: skhunt2@ilstu.edu

mechanisms that delimit the number of alternatives from which we choose when we transmit and interpret messages" (p. 46). Their textbook and much of Gudykunst's research (reviewed below) place information seeking at the core of intercultural communication.

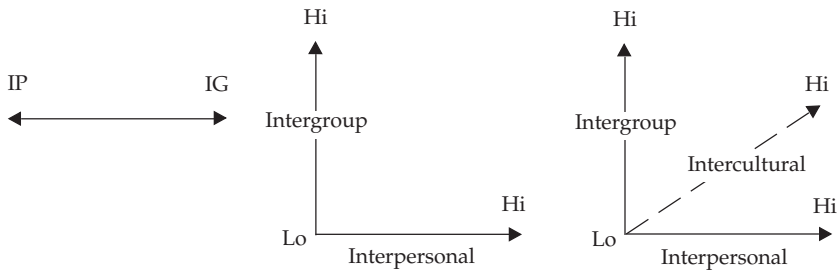
For most authors, however, information seeking is more of an undertow. We use this metaphor because, as a deep current, it actually drives the direction of both the communication and the theories that explain it. As a deep current, however, it often remains invisible from the surface of the waters of theory and research. In this essay we propose that, with rare exceptions, the wealth of knowledge that an information-seeking approach could offer intercultural is lost, because the term is not mentioned overtly in intercultural literature. We discuss the current status of information-seeking research in the area of intercultural communication. Finally, we discuss directions for future research in this fruitful area of communication studies.

CROSS-CULTURAL, INTERCULTURAL, INTERGROUP: WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT ANYWAY?

To understand the role of information seeking in intercultural communication, we must first define our terms. Samovar and Porter (1991) suggest that intercultural communication occurs whenever the role of culture is strong enough to influence the interaction noticeably. If it were so simple, our task would be easily accomplished, but those who know the intercultural communication field know it is more complicated than that. Specifically, there are four main foci of research under the umbrella of what we commonly call intercultural communication. *Cultural communication* refers to the communication practices of a specific group, without data comparison to another group, including, but not limited to, work done in the field of ethnography of communication. *Cross-cultural communication* refers not to interaction, but to scholarly analysis (in terms of comparison) of two or more cultures. For example, many studies compare people from two cultures on some a priori construct such as communication apprehension or use of persuasive strategies. This differs from *intercultural communication*, which is when individuals from two cultures actually speak to each other.

The above terms work well if one is interested only in the impact of cultural value and behavior differences on communication, for example, in terms of differences in request strategies or cultural uses of space. However, some authors have invoked another dimension to communication—an "intergroup dimension"—as they have examined the role of social identities and prejudice (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

Model 1 (1 dimension)	Model 2 (2 dimensions)	Model 3 (3 dimensions)
Social Identity Theory	Gudykunst & Lim (1986)	Baldwin & Hecht (in press)



IP = interpersonal; IG = Intergroup

Figure 1. Models of Intergroup Communication

In social identity theory (SIT), Tajfel (1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) presents a continuum from *interindividual* (interpersonal) to *intergroup* communication. Behavior ranges from wholly interpersonal, in which we draw inferences based on our personal knowledge of the other communicator, to wholly intergroup, in which we see the person only as a member of another group. The latter is helpful in war situations, in which seeing others as individuals might deter our willingness to destroy them. Tajfel and Turner argue that no communication is totally void of some level of social identity.

Gudykunst and Lim (1986) modify the SIT model to create independent intergroup and interpersonal dimensions. An interaction can be low on both the interpersonal and intergroup dimensions, such as when a professor treats a member of the office staff as a nonperson, or high on both dimensions, such as in interracial romance. However, this model blurs distinctions between intergroup and intercultural communication. A three-dimensional model (Baldwin & Hecht, in press) allows us to separate these two dimensions of communication (see Figure 1). The basic argument of this model is that just because two people perceive there to be differences (such as in interracial communication), there may not, in fact, be differences. In the same vein, two people can perceive themselves to be of the same group (e.g., both deaf students), yet actually have wide cultural differences (intercultural dimension).

INFORMATION SEEKING AND THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL INTERCULTURAL/INTERGROUP MODEL

The reason we propose this model is that we feel a straight application of information-seeking research to "intercultural" would be naive, if not simplistic. Rather, different issues will arise in interpersonal, intercultural, and intergroup communication. In the remainder of this article, we will consider each aspect of communication.

Information Seeking and Interpersonal Cultural Communication

Authors throughout this *HCR* issue have applied information seeking (IS) to a wide array of settings, thus we need not dwell in depth on those same issues here. Researchers have defined *information seeking* as "the process by which individuals proactively acquire feedback through the use of overt and monitoring . . . strategies to understand, predict, and control their environments; increase task mastery; and reduce role ambiguity" (Myers & Knox, 2001, p. 343, citations deleted). IS is related to information processing, which deals with the cognitive structures and activities of message perception, storage, and retrieval; but the former is focused specifically on behaviors that communicators use to make sense of their environments.

As research extends into the intercultural arena, IS will remain pertinent. One area of IS literature that has been extended overtly into intercultural communication is interpersonal communication. Uncertainty reduction theory, the prime theory extended to intercultural research, includes seven axioms that predict levels of uncertainty in initial interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Among these are axioms that predict that as uncertainty increases, so will information seeking and reciprocity. Later expansions of the theory included motivations for reducing uncertainty, types of uncertainty, and the inclusion of shared communication networks as a predictor of uncertainty (Berger, 1987; Berger & Bradac, 1982).

The coverage of IS literature above emphasizes the diversity of research in this area. However, because much of the research focuses on only one culture, often without admitting the role that culture plays in mediating IS behaviors, it can be said to be culture bound. In another light, however, we could argue that we have deep "cultural" understanding of the few cultures in which this literature has been done.

Information Seeking and Cross-Cultural Communication

As an extension of interpersonal communication, some studies have dealt with specific cultures or compared cultures in a way useful to our understanding of IS. Information seeking per se is not a central focus in

cross-cultural literature. However, there is cross-cultural communication literature pertinent to information seeking in the area of cultural values, politeness theories, and uncertainty reduction theory and its extensions.

First, Hofstede (1980) developed four axes that are commonly used in intercultural communication literature (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1997) to explain cross-cultural differences. These include individualism-collectivism, power distance (the acceptance of status difference in a culture), uncertainty avoidance (a cultural preference for structure), and masculinity-femininity (directness versus relational communication; role rigidity versus role flexibility). Only the first of these has received much attention in the IS literature. This, in itself, suggests a need for future research. For example, the reliance on peers for information in organizations—even an avoidance of seeking information from status superiors and subordinates—might characterize high power-distance cultures more than low power-distance cultures.

Individualism-collectivism (the closeness of interpersonal ties) and high and low context (the extent to which communicators look for information in the roles and situation as opposed to the explicit code, Hall, 1976) are the main dimensions researchers have used to study cultural differences. For example, people in high context cultures are said to be more able to gather information from nonverbal cues and verbal subtleties than those from low context cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). The two dimensions have been used to explain everything from use of apologies to compliment preference to conflict style, but seldom directly to IS. For example, Ting-Toomey & Kurogi (1998) predict that those in individualist cultures will prefer more direct confrontation, and those from collective cultures will prefer more face-saving approaches, such as avoidance and withdrawal from conflict.

Kim (1995), like Ting-Toomey, uses the notions of face and politeness in her research as she builds a model to predict conversational constraints. These constraints are the “procedural knowledge” that communicators use to “guide the choice of communication tactics and the general assessment of communication competence” (p. 148). The specific constraints Kim outlines—the need for clarity, the need to avoid hurting the other communicator’s feelings, and the need to avoid imposition—are firmly grounded in the work of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) notion of politeness and facework. Brown and Levinson define positive face as “the positive consistent self-image or personality claimed by interactants” (p. 61), or the desire to be liked by important people in our lives (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Negative face is the desire to maintain the autonomy of the speakers; it leads to communication that respects the independence of either the speaker or the hearer. Kim (1995) frames conversational constraints as overarching goals that guide specific communication strategies such as persuasion, requests, and other types of interaction.

The conflict and conversational constraint literatures are strong in developing the beginnings of a model for intercultural communication. Kim's research gets us the closest to seeing how the cultural and individual variables might actually lead to seeking particular types of information. However, future research can expand the models to include how individuals seek information in different contexts. For example, in conflict, even those who are concerned only with personal goals and use face-challenging styles likely have some awareness of the other and seek information to know if their goals are being met. Those who seek to preserve the face of the other would seek information, verbally and nonverbally, from the other to know how direct to be in the conflict or whether the other perceives an interaction as conflict. In terms of conversational constraints, one guided by a concern for clarity or competence may seek information more directly, or seek different types of information (e.g., does the other understand my proposal?) than someone seeking to preserve the other's feelings or to minimize imposition (e.g., how invested are others in their proposal and will they be offended if I challenge it?).

Perhaps the most extensive line of IS work in intercultural communication research is Gudykunst's extension of uncertainty reduction theory (URT) into intercultural communication (see reviews in Baldwin & Allen, 2001; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Rather than seeing intercultural communication as a "unique aspect of communication which requires special attempts at theorizing and research" (Gudykunst & Nishida, in Gudykunst, 1983b, p. 49), Gudykunst proposes that the processes of intra- and intercultural communication as essentially the same.

In extensive application of URT to initial interactions between people in different cultures, Gudykunst has produced a litany of findings regarding information seeking: (a) People in high context cultures are more cautious in initial interactions than people from low context cultures (Gudykunst, 1983a); (b) people in low-context cultures rely more on non-verbal expressiveness than those in high context cultures (Gudykunst, 1983b), possibly leading those in high-context situations to either rely more on subtle behaviors or not to rely on high expressiveness for information; (c) people in high-context cultures make assumptions about and ask questions about a stranger's background more than those in low-context cultures (Gudykunst, 1983b) and have a higher level of attributional confidence about strangers (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984); (d) people in low context cultures are more likely to use interrogation and self-disclosure (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984); (e) likelihood to self-disclose varies by age between respondents from different cultures (Gudykunst, Chua, & Gray, 1987); and (f) although amount of communication did not predict several uncertainty reduction variables in Korea, Japan, and the United States, other variables, such as self-monitoring, attributional confidence, and attraction are related to interactive uncertainty reduction strategies, but only

for certain relationship levels (Gudykunst, Yang, & Nishida, 1985).

In terms of interethnic communication, a communicative theory of ethnic identity has been proposed that suggests that ethnic groups have distinct cultures, including core symbols, meanings, and rules (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993). Differing core values will likely lead to differences in either the type of information sought in an encounter within one's own ethnic group, or in the ways in which one gathers such information. Because much literature in this line has looked at behaviors seen as satisfying in communication, it is likely that people in each ethnic group would look for the qualities (i.e., information seeking) in a covert, even subconscious way. Based on various studies, we can guess that many African Americans might seek to know that the communication partner can be trusted, can in some way help the African American in goal attainment, and is sincere. Many Mexican Americans might seek information on the status of the other person, on the person's communication goals (are they mutual?), and on the level of interest the other has in them. White Americans might also seek to find out if goals are mutual and if the other followed the conventions of politeness for the conversation (Hecht & Ribeau, 1984).

The interpersonal literature and its extension, cross-cultural literature, demonstrate that in interpersonal communication, IS includes information management, predicting others, soliciting task-related information, and so on; most of this has been applied to only one or two cultures and needs to be explored in broader cultural contexts. The breadth of topics reveals the need for cross-cultural research in almost every area covered elsewhere in this issue. At the same time, we should complicate interpersonal literature with the understanding that cultural values undergird information seeking. Values may work independently, though research should explore both emic- and etically derived cultural values with more vigor, or indirectly, through such things as cultural preferences for politeness forms or for reducing uncertainty in a situation. Finally, we know that within a culture, people within different ethnic groups may look for different information about others to judge interactions as satisfying. We do not know from cross-cultural literature alone what will happen when people from different cultures communicate. We assume that the cultural differences will emerge in interaction, but research looking specifically at intercultural interaction is needed to verify our suspicions.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the area of intercultural communication, Gudykunst (1983a) found that people are more likely to use background interrogation in intercultural encounters than in same-culture encounters, perhaps because these are a novel kind of communication, with higher ambiguity (Gudykunst,

1987) and lower attributional confidence (Lee & Boster, 1991). Cultural dissimilarity among partners was related to increased interrogation, self-disclosure, and nonverbal affiliative expressiveness (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984), though Lee and Boster (1991), measuring IS in terms of number of questions asked, found no difference between same- and intercultural interactions. Intimacy of the relationship, shared networks, and second-language competence predicted the use of interactive IS strategies, with interactive strategy use being the strongest predictor of attributional confidence (Gudykunst, 1985). At the same time, support is mixed for Axioms 3 and 5, suggesting that the information and reciprocity axioms of URT might require modification (Berger & Gudykunst, 1991).

Gudykunst (1993) expanded URT to include the emotional component of anxiety and many more predictor variables to create anxiety/uncertainty management theory. Some versions of this theory have kept information seeking as a predictor variable of both uncertainty and anxiety. However, one study found no relation between information-gathering strategies and anxiety or uncertainty (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckhe, 1998). Neuliep and Ryan (1998) concluded from a study of U.S. and international students at a U.S. university that anxiety regarding interacting with someone culturally different influenced uncertainty reduction during initial interaction.

At a minimal level, we need further understanding as to why the two main axioms of URT that relate most directly to IS do not hold up in research. There are problems in the above research in terms of the variety of IS strategies studied, an inconsistency of measurement with which they are studied, and possibly the underlying assumptions about the purposes of seeking information. For example, perhaps it is that people seek information not on predicting the other, but on what rewards or punishments the other person has to offer (Sunnafrank, 1989). Further, there is a gross assumption of cultural homogeneity in much of our literature that assumes that nations are equal to cultures. In fact, by most standard definitions of culture, there are multiple sets of values, norms, and behaviors within most national boundaries.

At a deeper level, IS research needs to be expanded to other areas of intercultural interaction. For example, adaptation theories include both social and media communication with both host sources and one's own group as a predictor of adaptation (Gudykunst & Hammer, 1987). Intercultural communication competence also contains an element of information seeking. Spitzberg (2000) illustrates this connection when he predicts that "as mastery of knowledge acquisition strategies increases, communicator knowledge increases" (p. 379), and, with that knowledge, so does communicator competence.

At the deepest level, we need to revisit the very assumption that guides much of this work, that interpersonal and intercultural communication

follow the same processes. In the interpersonal literature, overt strategies of seeking information have been the main focus of research, as also in intercultural communication. However, in both the bonding of a cultural identity through communication (cultural communication) and the interaction of those of different cultures (intercultural communication), things such as perceived similarity, perceived goodwill, the detection of subtle nuances of similarity and difference, the gaining of personal and cultural information about the other, often through indirect means, all complicate IS, such that IS should be considered not only in its overt behaviors, but in the tacit knowledge of the other that we seek in intercultural interaction. Although such interpersonal communication is not void of such issues, they seem to be much more important when one considers the other's cultural (dis)similarity.

INTERGROUP COMMUNICATION

If the research on information seeking in intercultural communication is sparse, than intergroup information-seeking literature is barren. Again, we use intergroup to refer to communication where group belonging, regardless of culture, is the difference. In intercultural communication (as we conceive of it), there are real cultural differences whether or not the interactants are aware of them. Intergroup communication, however, regards the perception of difference whether or not such differences exist. This can be seen, for example, in Black-White communication, where the communicators see each other in terms of stereotypes, when in fact there may be no real differences in values, beliefs, or behaviors. Three main areas of intergroup communication literature include information-seeking concepts, but again two of these include the concepts only implicitly. These areas are uncertainty reduction, intergroup identity and competence, and prejudice and stereotype literature.

Contrary to what we would suspect, with the current focus of societal attention on tense intergroup relationships, studies find no difference in self-disclosure patterns based on social identity, with attitude similarity, rather than ethnic similarity, predicting self-disclosure (Hammer, 1986). Mullin and Hogg (1999) found that people identified more with their in-groups and sought validation from these in-groups more when task uncertainty and the importance of the issue were high. This study suggests that, rather than looking at traditional IS behaviors in intergroup communication, we look again at in-group validation and at out-group perception.

This is a natural extension of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Based on SIT, we might find different information-seeking goals and sources at work as one moves from interindividual to intergroup communication. Communication accommodation theory, although

framed primarily as a sender approach to intergroup communication, might also benefit from an information-seeking approach. There is much one must determine about the other speaker's status, the situational norms, and whether intergroup concerns are present. The very acts of convergence or divergence require some information seeking, if even at a subconscious level, of the communication style of the other. Without that information, one could not accommodate.

Social identities are often acted out in norms of what is considered competent communication in intergroup behavior, a notion we will call *intergroup competence*. This has been defined both as the ability to recognize and act appropriately in intergroup situations and as the ability to ascribe to the other the same identity that person chooses for her- or himself in a given situation (Collier & Thomas, 1988)—both of which abilities require information seeking in order to be fulfilled. Differences in communication have been found in interracial (and intergender) communication in terms of question asking in initial encounters (Shuter, 1982), assertiveness versus politeness (Kochman, 1981), and perceived topic choice (Houston, 1993). Hecht's research finds that African Americans perceive certain issues, such as authenticity or stereotyping, relevant when interacting with Whites (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1989). African Americans may seek information to know when it is worthwhile to educate Whites and when to simply avoid certain issues or topics.

This research easily relates to a third area of intergroup communication—prejudice and stereotypes. Several studies reveal that many Blacks perceive Whites as manipulative, demanding (Leonard & Locke, 1993) or superficial and wishy-washy (Houston, 1993). Orbe's (1994) research among Black men finds that they see a need for code switching and seek ways to help one another cope in a society that oppresses them. Minority members, thus, may seek types of information not even tapped in the intercultural literature, such as whether a White who proffers friendship is being sincere. Waters's (1992) research supports this in that one of his predictors for interracial conflict in the workplace—in addition to cultural differences in communication such as eye contact and verbal feedback patterns—is the other person's stance on political issues such as affirmative action.

In addition to seeking information as to how prejudiced or sincere the other might be, there also seems to be both overt and subtle forms of information seeking regarding stereotype formation. Information seeking, as part of information storage, would be influenced by intergroup factors. We seek information (or do not seek information) at two levels in stereotype formation. First, we gather information, probably at a subconscious level, on the cues present in the other's behavior that might trigger a stereotype. Research shows that Whites, in their perception both of Blacks (Devine & Baker, 1991) and of Asian women (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady,

2000), do not automatically draw the same stereotypes, but rely on cues such as clothing or use of artifacts (chopsticks versus a brush), leading to different stereotypes. Individuating information, that which distinguishes specific individuals from a stereotyped group, enhances intergroup communication (Manusov, Winchatz, & Manning, 1997). In fact, it may be that people who are tolerant are not free of stereotypes, but rather consciously suppress them in order to think of and treat people more equitably. What distinguishes prejudiced from tolerant individuals may be their ability or willingness to seek information, information that counters stereotypes or individuates their intergroup communication partner.

CONCLUSION

In this review essay, we have proposed a three-axis model to explain the variations of intergroup and intercultural communication. If we are to hold to Tajfel and Turner's (1986) notion that all behavior is, at some level intergroup, and a notion by Dodd and Baldwin (1998) that most interactions are at least at some level intercultural, then most or all communication would have these varying levels of interpersonal, intercultural, and intergroup aspects of communication. What we are proposing here is that each type of communication will lend to a different set of IS issues, which, in turn, will compel a distinct IS agenda.

In communication with people of the same culture, the primary issues surrounding IS have involved issues such as predicting and explaining the other person, but largely in terms of interpersonal dimensions such as liking, everyday behavior, and information for task accomplishment. Much of this research could be considered cultural, as it considers a specific culture's patterns of gathering information. Even at this level, however, the research is gravely limited, as most areas pertaining explicitly to IS have not yet been extended to cultures beyond Western, often English-speaking cultures such as the United States. Thus, the first research extension is to continue to broaden the samples of our current, often culture-bound projects.

In intercultural communication, one feasibly could not be aware of the cultural difference. If this is the case, one might seek to explain the behavior of someone who deviates from expectations (without knowing that culture explains the difference). However, for effective communication, one would need the skills to gather such data to make more complex predictions of the other that incorporate both individual and cultural factors (Spitzberg, 2000), and to be aware of the cultural differences. In many cases of intercultural interaction, we are aware that the other interactant is from another culture. In these cases, we may deliberately seek cultural information—and cultural differences lead us to seek information in dif-

ferent ways. Research should continue to investigate the ways people seek information overtly, but should also extend to the seeking of tacit knowledge. We should explore how people determine the nuances of similarities in behavior and perception that lead to communication competence. This is especially needed in the area of adaptation, where much of the adaptive process may be seen as a type of seeking information. The types of information, the subtlety of the information gathering process, and the anxiety that accompanies it mark intercultural communication as a different genre of communication.

The perception of group identity adds another wrinkle to the IS process. First, we might seek information about and from our own group to determine how to be an appropriate member of that group or information about others to determine if they are "real" members of the group. For example, some Native Americans engage in "razzing" one another to determine group membership. Indeed, "failure on the part of a participant to read and respond to a razz appropriately, that is to say, knowingly, makes the Indian-ness of such an individual suspect" (Pratt, 1996, p. 245). Those who are more tolerant may seek information that individuates others and breaks down stereotypes. Those of oppressed groups may seek information that identifies those who are tolerant and those who are not, when to use which verbal code, and when to confront or not confront intolerance. Research needs to explore both the issues about which one seeks information in such cases and the ways in which one does it. Is the seeking intentional or beneath consciousness? More importantly, how do intergroup biases and power relations impact how information is sought and who is allowed to seek it publicly and in what ways?

We have seen that there is a wide spectrum of application of information-seeking concepts to the interpersonal dimension, but, despite the rich possibilities, only a few authors have explicitly extended information seeking into intercultural communication. Still, information seeking rolls beneath the surface, a deep current driving the processes active in adaptation, competence, stereotype reduction, prejudice avoidance, and accommodation. It is time for researchers to bring this deep current to the surface, to understand it more overtly, in order to better understand intercultural and intergroup communication.

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