

## **Thesis: Intercultural Communication & Ideology**

### *Summary*

#### **Introduction**

The reason for starting the research project arose because of the questions being raised by all kinds of experiences both in my homeland and in foreign countries. Why do some people see the unknown as frightening and why do others see it as challenging? A foreigner is often seen as a *total stranger*, about whom you need to know *things* and who you need to approach carefully. People have different kinds of truth, but the truth of one person is often subordinate to the truth of someone else. This difference in power is often trivialised. How did the image of the stranger come into being and what role does power play in intercultural interaction? What do experts mean when they talk of the image of the foreigner? And is there any difference between intercultural communication and 'common' communication? (chapter 1)

With this research project I try to find answers to the three following general questions: (1) What is the reason that in many cases ineffective communication strategies are used in intercultural contexts? (2) From the answer to question 1, that in fact intercultural ideology is to a large extent causing this ineffectiveness, the second question is posed: What does this intercultural ideology look like, what are the effects and how is it defended? (3) On the basis of this analysis the next question is: What can be the elements for an alternative? The questions are approached from a conceptual point of view. The basic concepts in this study are culture, communication and power. These concepts come together in the subject of intercultural communication, which forms the thread of this study. Literature search and empirical research have affected each other constantly during the project. The empirical research methods that are used are: observations of the societal debate on multiculturalism, reflection in focus groups and interviewing. Respondents are selected among professionals who are obliged to have intercultural contacts professionally. (chapter 2)

#### **Exploration**

The debate on multiculturalism switches between the demand that migrants should assimilate and show respect for each others' cultures. White and black schools and city-areas come into being. Professionals from minority cultures are employed especially because they are supposed to be familiar with foreign cultures. Since the attacks in New York on the eleventh of September 2001 the societal debate has hardened and the contrast between ethnic groups has increased. The call for more security is big. But most reactions actually contribute to insecurity instead of relief and many people wonder how this will end. We seem to have lost control over these social processes. There is a lot of stress in intercultural interaction that actually is not provoked by the situation *per se*. On the other hand there are dilemmas that are caused by conflicting values. (chapter 3)

In the societal debate and in literature the universalism-relativism-debate is dominating. In conversations people seem to base their attitude on instructions that correspond with the assumptions and instructions of the anthropologist Herskovits in his book *Cultural Relativism* (1972). He focuses on cultural determinism, the freedom of values and the right to culture. Herskovits develops his ideas in the period of decolonization and these are to be seen as a protest

against western imperialism. His message is: keep away from the ex-colonies. He wants to fight western ethnocentrism. Cultural relativism is, in the eyes of Herskovits, on bad terms with universal human rights. The deterministic concept of culture is taken over uncritically by sociologists for the multicultural society. In the short term relativistic assumptions bring advantages for some, for example the excuse that culture offers for adopting an aloof attitude towards foreigners. In the long term this will not work. In the multicultural society there is a completely different context and it is the question of how Herskovits' instructions contribute to the new context. Is it not clear that in a multicultural context, where people live and work together, other types of instructions are necessary? Are we not supposed to approach each other and discuss the pros and cons of different habits and traditions, as Procee (1991) proposes? What is the reason that we do not do this even over 10 years after he proposed it? Considering the difference in context between the period of decolonization before and the problems around multiculturalism nowadays, I will speak from now on of an intercultural ideology instead of cultural relativism. Among culture philosophers in literature the protest against the ideological concept of culture is increasing. But the media still makes use of the ideological cultural terminology that associates with the jargon in society, where one speaks in terms of *us* and *them*. New forms of superiority come up, like the superior ethical monism of Cliteur (2002). To deny the societal tensions freeze an open discussion too. Culture has become increasingly a means of power. (chapter 4)

Whether an intercultural ideology actually is at work, is examined by comparing the assumptions of Herskovits with the sayings of respondents in focus groups and in interviews. Although no one mentions the name Herskovits, the correspondence between his assumptions and those of the respondents is big. Most of the respondents describe culture as a set of shared norms and values that determines a certain group by turning them over from generation to generation. There are few respondents who resist seeing themselves and others within the frame of cultural boundaries. One sees intercultural contacts as instructive. People from non-western cultures say that they choose the best from different cultures. Western respondents say that intercultural contact is instructive because it makes them conscious of their own culture. But hardly anyone is able to talk about the characteristics of their own culture, except in a very general way. Many answers, both about the definitions and about cultural characteristics seem to be derived from literature by respondents. Two thirds of the respondents think that communication is determined by culture and half of them are afraid to discriminate. Especially with the description of bottlenecks respondents say: "Who am I to judge foreign habits?" No one speaks about human rights spontaneously. There seems to be a kind of partition in thinking between the intercultural frame of mind and that of human rights. Respondents say that training in intercultural communication is interesting, but that it didn't contribute to finding solutions for problems. Investigating the opinion about experts in consultancy offices shows that Pinto (1990) mainly is rejected. Hofstede (1991), and Hoffman and Arts (1994) are better appreciated. (chapter 5)

In which way Pinto, Hofstede, and Hoffman and Arts relate to the intercultural ideology is examined by comparing again the assumptions and instructions of Herskovits with those of the experts, but at this point the comparison is focused on questions that live in society and the way experts answer these. The questions are about knowledge of cultures, communication skills and about conflicting values (the power issue). The experts start from a relativistic and deterministic point of view on culture. They make use of culture typologies with the risk that it results in stereotyping. The space left for communication is suggested to be quite small. Pinto is not clear about solutions for problems around the power issue. Hofstede is ambiguous about learning cultural habits: we can't understand them, but we should take them over. Hoffman and Arts advise helpful communication skills, but they struggle with the concept of culture and

communication in relation to the power issue. In later publications Hoffman (1999 and 2002) makes a start with relating culture and human rights, but his relativistic dilemma is not solved fruitfully. The conclusion is that the experts contribute to the intercultural ideology. My most important criticism is that in their *differential* approach they don't give attention to *the system of cultural systems* and to *the interaction between individual and cultural system*. (chapter 6)

## Analysis

In the exploration indications have been found that the intercultural ideology interferes with communication. The prevailing theories of intercultural communication are insufficiently critical about the basic concepts and about the effects of the intercultural ideology. In spite of the criticism of cultural relativism since the mid seventies, experts in intercultural communication have neglected these. Among culture philosophers criticism has increased only since then. Culture, nature, category and fact have been confused with each other and they have been merged together. To be able to analyse the ideological culture concept, the rationality-thesis of Habermas (1981) is combined with different analytical perspectives that are used by Finkelkraut (1990) Lemaire (1976) and Procee (1991). On the basis of this model 24 different critical statements are formulated about the ideology. (chapter 7)

Thereupon the critical statements about intercultural communication are worked out in relation to the meaning of the ideological culture concept and its normative implications. The following subjects are discussed: culture as a metaphysical entity; culture as vested interest; and culture as a duty. It is about maintaining against expansive cultures, the idea that one is enabled to judge cultures and it is about the blind spots of cultures. Next the restraints of the absolutist view of the world with different restricted (static) cultures are discussed and what this means for interaction and the ideas about intercultural dynamics, with its mechanisms of enclosing and excluding. It is also about the three intercultural normative instructions of the ideology: freedom of cultural values, the right to culture and the norm of tolerance. To combat intolerance these instructions are insufficient. Cultural determinism lacks attention for human competencies as the ability of (self) reflection, (self) criticism, creativity and the ability of problem solving. Cultural determinism activates the 'culture-excuse', it is focusing on loyalty to cultures with the risk that cultural groups 'turn into themselves'.

The conclusion is that the intercultural ideology results in incongruity, contradictions and ambiguities. This pinches especially in the normative sphere. Freedom of cultural values, the right to culture, loyalty to culture, ethnocentrism, tolerance and intolerance do come from the same source, the ideological concept of culture. An effect of this is that the normative demands produce two mutually exclusive variations of the ideology: *monism* and *relativism*. The first, *monism*, claims the right to culture which generates ethnocentrism as well and is focused only on the views of one's own culture. The second, *relativism*, demands tolerance for cultural diversity and generates tolerance for intolerance too. These ambiguities create confusion and cause a value vacuum at the intercultural level, which in practice results in a struggle for power. This means that due to internal contradictions the intercultural ideology ends up in paradoxical instructions for interaction. (chapter 8)

Based on the analysis some hypotheses are constructed about what the influence of the intercultural ideology is on human thought and behaviour and the connection it has with problems of intercultural interaction. The intercultural paradox asks for clarification on three levels: (1) The intercultural ideology is influencing the inner self of humans because of the pressure the ideology produces on having a cultural identity. There are static and dynamic opinions about identity. The more statically someone thinks about identity the more chance there

is that under the influence of the ideology someone will feel himself, as a result of intensive intercultural interaction, to be in a gap between two cultures. On the other hand someone with a more dynamic opinion on identity and who has insight into the intercultural paradox will probably be able to create a link between the different elements of his socialisation. (2) Under the influence of the ideology interpersonal interaction will suffer from stereotyped images about each other. One can't combine the ideological deterministic view on people with the image of one's self, what actually intensifies the image of the foreigner as a *total stranger*. The result is that in interaction stereotyped people have to defend themselves against the stereotyped images that do not correspond with the image they have of themselves. Instead of defining together the interaction situation they are determining each other. This often results in struggle. (3) The power positions between individuals do not always correspond with the power positions between groups. The more threat (realistic or not) increases, the more one will tend to a monistic attitude. As long one can keep some distance, one can permit oneself a relativistic attitude. Because of the value vacuum at the intercultural level and the risk that this has for a struggle for power one will try to avoid intercultural interaction or confrontations as long as possible. When this is impossible the relativistic attitude will be exchanged for the monistic attitude and one will be more aggressive (both verbally and non-verbally). This mechanism for example explains the quick change in attitude after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 when the attacks in New York took place. Although the process of hardening had started already on the surface of social interaction, the attacks quickened the adoption of the monistic attitude because of the increased danger that was experienced. One didn't even need to change assumptions; one only had to change from variation. Conclusion: The intercultural ideology is an obstacle, because it splits up and it produces three patterns of reaction: (1) we-they oppositions, (2) avoidance and (3) aggressive behaviour. (chapter 9)

Escape from the splitting effects of the intercultural ideology is difficult because of its paradoxical assumptions. A paradox results in fact in reasoning in circles and dilemmas. Watzlawick et al (1976) deals with the effects of paradoxical communication. Enduring paradoxical communication (a) something is claimed and (b) something is claimed about this claim and (c) these two claims mutually exclude one another. Further it is impossible to escape the underlying frame of the claims and there is the risk of sanctions or the stigma to be bad. When people in a multicultural society are influencing each other (and they do because the cultural boundaries are porous) then (a) one has the right to culture, (b) one has to tolerate cultural diversity and (c) one has to tolerate intolerance of cultures too. People who try to discuss the underlying ideological view about cultures are blamed for neglecting diversity. Those who try to criticise other cultures while making use of the ideological terminology will drop in the ideological patterns (see above) and will be blamed for that. In other words, there is no way to do things well.

After the analysis a start is made to explore an alternative. The alternative that is eligible, because it is reciprocal, is the dialogue. A dialogue has the following characteristics: intentionality, integrity, rationality, authenticity (De Boer 1980) and the willingness to change opinion if reasonable grounds are found (Rehg 1994). Communicative conditions are furthermore the right to speak for oneself in conversation and the right of everyone to self-determination, which is to be seen from the perspective that this counts for everyone. It means also that people are interested in each other and that they take each other seriously. In case the communicative conditions are not met and the aims of the partners in conversation are not transparent, there is a high chance of ending up in strategic interaction (Habermas 1979). An intercultural situation is in fact an open situation where interaction partners should find agreement on what the content of the interaction will be, how the relationship should be defined

and on which communicative conditions this should be founded. If there is no agreement it will be hard to achieve effective communication.

Knowledge about cultural values and habits broadens people's view on the world, but it does not improve interaction. Improving interaction skills will be of help in the discussion on differences in values. But the field of conflicting values is in fact located in the sphere of ethics, morals and rights. Reciprocal interaction, defining the interaction situation mutually, the right to speak for oneself and the right to determine oneself are part of a provisional alternative, which is called communicative moral universalism. (chapter 10)

### **Evaluation and Alternative**

The actual functioning and the effect of the intercultural ideology are made plausible in focus groups with the help of reflection on an analytical frame, in which the two variations of the intercultural ideology and the provisional alternative were introduced. At the abstract level almost everyone has a preference for the alternative, but also says that in reality they change between the different views. To adopt the alternative seems complicated. A subsequent discussion of the cases from respondents' own experience showed that they easily drop back into patterns of the ideology and that they got stuck in dilemmas and reasoning in circles. To control the outcome of the focus groups, new respondents were asked in interviews about a case in which a dilemma was built in. Despite the preference these respondents also had for the alternative, which they showed in a multiple choice question, they too dropped back into the ideological patterns. Only one of the interviewed respondents tried to refer to human rights, but did this in an implicit way. Half of the respondents reacted predominantly monistically and the other half predominantly relativistically. Results of the focus groups and interviews show the dominance of the ideology and how deep the intercultural ideology is rooted. The solution that was offered with intercultural criteria, like human rights, seemed to be a surprising option for many respondents in the focus groups. The need for an alternative seems to be large. (chapter 11)

My proposal is in *the first place* that an intensive insight in the interfering functioning and effect of the intercultural ideology and the accompanying vocabulary should be encouraged. Recognising the ideology is complicated, because it appears every time in a different way. In *the second place* it is necessary to investigate alternatives collectively. An alternative should prevent people being placed under restraint of 'their culture' and an alternative should go together with an alternative vocabulary. In *the third place* we should realise that for co-operation we are interdependent of each other. Interaction is in respect to this not free of obligations and it should be normal to evaluate social processes on its effects.

For the onset of an alternative I make use of the ideas of Foot (2001). She explains why reciprocity forms an objective ground for what can be seen as morally good. The 'objective idealism' of Hösle (1998) presents the opportunity to connect moral and universal human rights. From the critical analysis of the ideological concept of culture it is possible to derive stepping stones to develop the alternative further. In it the view of the world appears as mutually overlapping networks from uniquely interacting people that are giving form to the world. The rights of the strongest that are the consequence of the intercultural value vacuum should be brought under control by making a distinction between fundamental rights and all kinds of different values that should be tested on these fundamental ones. It is useful to join with an existing fundamental principle, like The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

A multicultural society requires new demands on up-bringing and co-operation and not simply reproduction of traditions. A (self) critical attitude is needed, that is combined with interpersonal solidarity and the competence to consider different interests. These subjects need attention in the field of education too. The societal debate should be assisted by evaluative-research. Working out details is advisable not only for scientific reasons, but also for all kinds of societal contexts, like that of daily interaction. (chapter 12)

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