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Special Issue

Ferments in the Field: The Past, Present and Futures of Communication Studies

Intergroup Communication: Identities and Effective Interactions

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Abstract

Intergroup relations have been studied systematically for more than 60 years and have become embedded in mainstream communication studies. The intergroup communication approach provides a crucial level of understanding beyond the interpersonal and the societal, highlighting the interconnections and mutual influences between groups and individuals. In this paper, we briefly describe the main features and history of intergroup communication, pointing to ways of moving forward in the light of current challenges. We highlight the complexity and messiness of intergroup communication and the need for more diversity in theory and method. The time is right for new thinking in intergroup communication that leads to the improvement of communication within and across groups.

Intergroup Communication: Identities and Effective Interactions

Intergroup communication (IGC) is everywhere. Indeed, most of our communication in daily life, as well as in organizations, institutions, and nations, takes place between members of groups that are potentially opposed, where there is a clear sense of “our” group and “their” group (“us” and “them”). For example, we communicate constantly with members of other genders, and (at least in complex societies) with people in other ethnic, religious, or cultural groups. At times, such communication is tense or hostile, and sometimes it descends into overt discrimination, war, or genocide. Beyond this, we often wear our group memberships on our sleeves, sometimes literally through uniforms and dress, as well as through language, accent, and communication styles.

Our group memberships are communicated via multiple media and in many forms. For example, the meaning ascribed to a uniform is only one driver of communication by individuals wearing it (see Adam & Galinsky, 2012). These features make the study of IGC complex and messy, with a myriad of elements dynamically intertwined as individuals negotiate their group identities. Understanding this aspect of communication is central to making sense of all communication, from face-to-face talk between family members to mass and social media. Yet many parts of the field neglect intergroup communication, focusing instead on micro-level interpersonal dynamics or macro-level critiques of societal institutions; the intergroup lens can transform these perspectives.

A Brief History of Intergroup Communication

IGC has been studied systematically for many years, dating at least from Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner, and Fillenbaum’s (1960) study of the impact of speakers’ language on impressions among bilingual listeners. Since that time, there has been a plethora of such studies all over the world (see Giles & Maass, 2016; Giles & Watson, 2013, for reviews), which point to the complex and nuanced ways in which interethnic and intercultural relations are expressed in communication. There has also been longstanding work into the arbitrary nature of groups and the identities attached to them (e.g., Sherif, 1961), leading to the development of Social Identity Theory (SIT: Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

One prominent framework in the study of intergroup communication, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and its satellite models, was first developed in the early 1970s, and has almost since its beginnings emphasized the impact of group memberships on language and communication (for a recent review, see Giles, 2016). Another theory, Linguistic Intergroup Bias (LIB: Maass, Salvi, Acuri, & Semin, 1989) makes clever predictions about grammatical forms as a signal of intergroup attitudes (although generally not in ongoing talk). These three theories have been central to the development of IGC, but as we argue below, it is time to go beyond them.

IGC work for many years was conducted largely outside the field of communication, mainly in social psychology. Because of this, much of it has not focused on the process of communication, which is the distinguishing feature of communication studies as a whole, but instead has emphasized attitudes, stereotypes, and discriminatory behavior. It is only in this century that IGC has been transformed into a sub-field distinct from intercultural, organizational, and other areas of communication. For example, the International Communication Association's Intergroup Communication Interest Group was formed just over a decade ago, whereas closely related Divisions have existed since the Association's beginnings; the first international conference on IGC was held in 2017. There is now a burgeoning literature (e.g., Giles & Maass, 2016) that combines the sociopsychological emphasis on the antecedents and consequences of communication with detailed explorations of the process.

Largely independently of this work, sociolinguists and some sociologists began to study the details of language, accent, and style as markers of intergroup attitudes, especially where people were multilingual or multi-dialectal. In this century, sociolinguistics has also contributed greatly, so that IGC is now more interdisciplinary. What unites researchers is a central interest in the impact of the social – group memberships and inter-relations – on communication by individuals, and vice versa.

The Intergroup Communication Perspective

People have negative as well positive attitudes towards other groups, which influence the effectiveness of interactions. Thus, IGC examines communication between individuals, and

explicitly explores how *group* salience motivates them. In addition, IGC researchers foreground the dynamic nature of communication between group members, where the salience or valence of intergroup relations can change in an instant. Consider the paradigm interpersonal case of communication between spouses, where the husband may suddenly make a sexist remark or tell a sexist joke. What was an intimate and friendly interaction may suddenly become a hostile gender-based one, with the resultant conflict and hurt feelings. On the other hand, the wife may choose to let this comment pass, or may laugh with her husband – and this may anger her female friends when they hear the story, as they believe that she has let the gender group down. In fact, the large majority of (arguably all) interactions have the potential to become intergroup, given everyone's multiple group memberships and the chance for rivalry or conflict to become salient (Gangi & Soliz, 2016).

This intergroup potential pervades our interactions. Therefore, theories that explain communication in terms of individual personality characteristics, psychological states, or communication skills risk missing central features that drive both attitudes and behavior. These features often emerge from conversations, but they can also be chronic states, as the relations between (for example) different organizational units often are. This means that training in effective communication skills is often not enough to improve relations between different parts of a business, hospital, or the like – yet most communication training to this day rests on the assumption that people are motivated to communicate well, but differentially able to do so (see Cargile & Giles, 1996; Gallois, 2003). Traditional intergroup contact interventions, face-to-face or online, make the same assumptions, and also do not lead to improvements in communication (see Harwood & Vincze, 2012).

Of course, many communication scholars would agree that larger forces than the interpersonal influence or even determine communication. For them, communication reflects and reproduces structural differences in power and resources built into institutions and the whole society. Thus, in their view it is extremely difficult for people of different status to communicate across a power hierarchy or to resist the power of institutions like the media. These scholars argue that doctors usually communicate inadequately with patients, employers with employees, police officers with private citizens (especially those from

disadvantaged minority groups), and so forth. This is an important viewpoint, but again something is missed – in this case, the mechanisms connecting larger societal relations to individual attitudes and behavior. This can lead to the assumption that mediated and institutional discourse drives behavior, with less emphasis on how, when, and how much this actually happens. The IGC lens provides a strong focus on individual differences in the way power relations are interpreted, and the ways in which they do (or do not) influence talk and nonverbal communication. The field of communication needs more dialogue between these different groups of scholars, with a view to explicating the balance of institutional and individual forces. In our view, IGC is the best means of promoting this dialogue.

Following Giles (2012), Abeyta and Giles (in press) developed a parsimonious set of Principles of IGC that underscore the complex interplay between group and individual. The first three Principles focus on the components of IGC. They state that diverse modes of communication are group membership markers and individuals usually possess multiple categories of them. Group memberships are created and sustained through group prototypes, histories, and stories that group members tell over time to make their group positively distinctive from salient outgroups. Individuals can engage in communication practices that (de)emphasise group differences and thereby dynamically harden (soften) intergroup boundaries. The fourth principle concerns the ways in which individuals make attempts to accommodate to other groups either to pass into them or for other reasons, which may be welcomed or rejected. Thus, IGC is a two-way (or multi-way) street, and ineffective communication should generally not be attributed to a perpetrator at the expense of a victim. This should be an obvious point, but it is often ignored in models of intercultural, health, and other organizational or institutional communication. The final Principle invokes norms in establishing what groups will judge as normative or deviant behaviour, and highlights the extent to which many norms governing communication are associated with one or more social identities and have intergroup relations built into them.

As these Principles show, attitudes, motivations, intergroup history, and communication are mutual and reciprocal influences. Furthermore, societal and intergroup

forces, particularly power inequalities, are central contributors to communication, but communication still happens between individual people.

Adding Value with the IGC Perspective

The IGC approach highlights the importance of examining *both* the group *and* the individual, as well as their complex interaction. This approach also makes intergroup conflict the central focus of communication research. Thus, IGC makes a unique contribution to the whole field in a number of ways; we sketch out a few here.

Miscommunication. The IGC perspective highlights miscommunication as a key feature of communication, not simply a mistake. The IGC lens encourages us to examine the influence of group memberships and intergroup relations on people's self-concept, self-esteem, and communication. The naturalness of groups, their ubiquitousness and arbitrariness, means that interlocutors are often not aware of their impact. Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991) developed a taxonomy of miscommunication and problematic talk (perhaps a better way to describe this) to capture this situation. In their model, miscommunication can be as hard-to-perceive as a minor linguistic mistake, or as major as chronic misunderstanding stemming from structural differences in a culture – which itself is difficult or impossible to perceive for people inside the culture. One of the most interesting features of this taxonomy is the tendency it reveals to attribute miscommunication to the personality or the cultural rules of the other. Speakers – including communication scholars – resist understanding problematic talk in terms of misaligned goals or structure, and prefer to blame others, especially outgroup members. This model explains why miscommunication is not often solved by focusing on speaker competence. Unfortunately, to date very few IGC scholars have built on this model to test these different levels of miscommunication; this is an important area for future research.

IGC in context. The IGC approach allows researchers to generalize principles and findings across contexts, while at the same time attending to the special features of each context. Over the years, the contexts studied have proliferated from their start in intercultural and intergender relations. These areas, and others like health and intergenerational communication, now have long research histories; the various versions of CAT, LIB, and so

forth have been explicated mainly through them. More recently, other institutional contexts like police-citizen, tourism, organizations, and performance areas like music and dance have been added. Furthermore, new communicative behaviors beyond language, accent, paralanguage, and nonvocal behavior have been studied. Clothing, music, dress, and appearance has been shown to be central to the communication of identity and group membership (e.g., Keblusek, Giles, & Maass, in press), both in terms of emblems (e.g., uniforms, patches and colors) and nonverbal behaviors (e.g., intensity of make-up, conservativeness of dress).

Critical analysis of culture. The IGC lens encourages a critical analysis of problems based in culture, including conflicts between health professionals and their patients, the impact of prejudice on legal communication, prejudice in the media, and the like, from the perspective of the individuals who are the actual communicators. It goes without saying that analysis of cultural institutions is important in understanding communication. The IGC perspective, however, focuses on the strategic and tactical behaviors of interlocutors, who interpret these institutions and their situations in their own ways. IGC highlights individual differences in the same context, and the ways in which interpersonal as well as intergroup history can help or hinder communication.

IGC in the real world. IGC is firmly grounded in intergroup relations as they exist in real-life contexts. Unlike studies that aim to demonstrate that any arbitrary feature of people can provoke us-and-them responses, IGC researchers find sufficient material in the contexts of real life. For instance, the many micro-level communication interventions (e.g., communication skills, intercultural communication competence, organizational training) have generally been found to work only in very limited contexts. Likewise, robust macro-level critiques of communication institutions have not led to effective interventions. Thus, although the field of communication as a whole has produced a wealth of knowledge about how to communicate well across different settings, this work has not made the significant difference it should in reducing prejudice, discrimination, and inequality, or in improving communication and its consequences. The intergroup approach is crucial for this because it explains how individuals in salient group settings actively (sometimes deliberately)

miscommunicate. This understanding challenges communication scholars engaged in conventional communication competence research, but it is essential to produce an explanation of communication that accepts miscommunication as a ubiquitous part of life.

IGC is crucial for making this kind of difference. Communication skills must be understood in context, taking full account of intergroup and interpersonal history, along with motivations, intentions, and reactions to the behavior of others. Skills are only one part of this equation, not necessarily the most important. In some cases, developing communication skills may be the worst thing one can do, because interlocutors become better and better at expressing hostility, discrimination, or power inequalities, and at winning a power game. Pitts and Harwood (2015) have described this situation and pointed to the importance of including IGC in skills and intergroup contact training. This is a new and burgeoning arena of IGC that has the transformative potential (e.g., Watson, Manias, Geddes, & Della, 2015).

Challenges to the IGC Perspective

One reason for the slowness of the IGC perspective to penetrate the field of communication may be the desire of scholars – shared by scientists of all stripes – for simplicity and elegance. This poses a number of challenges to researchers in IGC as they reach out further to the rest of the field.

Complexity and messiness. The most obvious challenge is certainly complexity. This is evident in the propositions and principles of most intergroup theories of communication, like CAT. It is also evident in the complex results even of experimental studies, and the highly multivariate interactions that often appear. Successive versions of theories have become simpler, as researchers gain better understanding of the key aspects of intergroup communication. Nevertheless, current IGC models are usually complex and include many variables, which can make them difficult to test. The challenge can in part be addressed with the emergence of innovative and better methods and tools for quantitative and qualitative analysis that make it easier to base empirical research on more complex models (e.g., Angus & Gallois, in press). However, only a small number of IGC researchers have taken up these new techniques.

A key issue is that intergroup relations themselves are complex, and not amenable to elegant explanation. For example, Giles, Gardikiotis, Keblusek, and Maass (2017) reported on stories about intergroup communication in a regional newspaper. They found that most of the stories contained multiple ingroups and outgroups – not the single and separate ones valued by experimentalists. Furthermore, groups were nested, individuals moved back and forth between them, and the identities in them changed dynamically across time, place, and situation. It is possible to study such phenomena using traditional social-sciences methods, but this likely does not do justice to real contexts. Thus, there is an ongoing tension between what researchers want and what life provides.

Theoretical narrowness. IGC has developed over the years along with a few theories (SIT, CAT, LIB, and one or two others). These theories have and continue to serve the area well. Nevertheless, there are many other theories in communication that could and should be adapted to IGC. As Taylor, King, and Usborne (2010, p. 275) stated:

We have argued for the need to expand the theoretical base of intergroup communication, not as a replacement for social identity, but rather to broaden the field and generate new insights....Merely suggesting alternative theories, however, is not good enough. The chosen theories must be serious contenders with depth and breadth, and they must be theories that have the potential to add new perspectives.

It will be the job of researchers in the future to accomplish this task. If they do, the contribution of IGC to the whole field can only increase.

Methodological narrowness. Similarly, IGC is constrained by its focus on verbal and nonverbal behaviors, often only one of them. As we noted above, it will be important in the future to include communicative symbols like appearance, music, architecture (cf. Adam & Galinsky, 2012). The problem is that the behaviors studied are themselves tied to methodologies and meta-methodologies. For example, many approaches in communication recognize only text as an area of study, conducting detailed analyses of words but leaving everything else out. Other approaches (especially experimental ones) eschew words in favor of nonverbal behavior. This is a symptom of a deeper problem: the extent to which research questions are driven by method. Even though there have been many calls for mixed methods

and triangulation, few researchers even cite work using different approaches (e.g., experimental researchers citing discourse studies), much less combine them. There are some notable exceptions, particularly when those with a more linguistic bent team up with more psychological researchers. Nevertheless, there is much room for such collaboration in future research.

IGC in its turn presents challenges to the whole field of communication. There is resistance throughout the field to examining individuals, institutions, and their interconnections through groups and identities. Perhaps most importantly, the very idea of intergroup communication goes against the grain of understanding communication as (in)effective. For example, most professional courses (medicine, law, etc.) now include communication skills training, but almost all of them base it on simple listening and expressive skills. There is resistance on the part of educators to go beyond competence training. Not to do so misses the intergroup dynamics that can emerge at any point. This often leads to disappointment among young doctors, nurses, lawyers, police officers, and so forth, when their carefully-learned skills break down amidst intergroup tension or hostility. Their teachers, however, often insist that the problem is either with inadequate training or with the students themselves. It is not easy to convince teachers that IGC will add value to their training, even though it will.

Similarly, IGC goes against the grain of those scholars whose goal is to critique institutions and power hierarchies. IGC has the potential to bring about significant social change, but it emphasizes the role of individuals within systems, rather than the systems themselves. Much can be gained by critical research, and its attention to the naturalness of existing systems is very valuable. If one's goal is to change institutions, it is not easy to be convinced that working through individuals will help, although it will.

Conclusion

IGC has as its main goal to make a difference in the ways that people communicate. There is an integral connection between the study of communication and its application towards more effective communication, which has only begun to be explicated. Translating IGC theory into action means research to develop a better understanding of both the factors underlying

IGC across contexts and the unique features of each setting. IGC researchers must be interdisciplinary and not stand apart from others. There are theoretical and methodological issues that must be addressed for the study of new contexts to be optimized, as new tools and methodologies for communication study are developed. In particular, scholars will need to examine context, perceptions, behavior, norms, and reactions *at the same time*, which is a daunting task. IGC scholars must continue with research where they leave the laboratory and unravel the complexities of real-life settings. It will also be important to maintain a focus on nonverbal communication along with language (Castelli & Galfano, 2016). Finally, culture is central to IGC, and the perspectives of cultural insiders and outsiders must be included in research. It is essential to incorporate non-western and indigenous approaches to culture for IGC to make a significant difference (Giles & Watson, 2013). We believe it is well worth taking on these challenges.

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