

Intercultural Communication: A New Approach to International Relations and Global Challenges

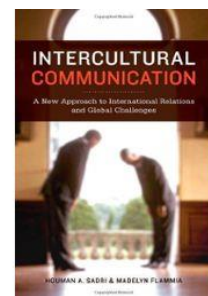
By Houman S. Sadri and Madelyn Flammia

The Continuum International Publishing Company, 2011

Reviewed by Katrin Volt at diversophy.com

Intercultural Communication: A New Approach to International Relations and Global Challenges has four parts with a total of 10 Chapters aimed at the general public.

The recurring concept used throughout the book is ‘mindful communicator’, defined as “interactions with members of other cultures in which an individual strives to understand the cultural values, beliefs and norms of other parties and to use that understanding to adapt his or her communication style to achieve a meaningful exchange or win-win result.” Being mindful is an asset when communicating with others so we should remember to treat others as they would like to be treated.



However, how does being mindful work on both sides? If you are mindful towards me, do I need to adapt? If we are all mindful about each other, does that actually limit our perceptions by encouraging people to be the same and not dare act differently? Then there would be no more wars, no more ‘terrorism’ and we would live happily ever after. Unfortunately, those in power do not seem to have the same vision.

To involve the reader more, it would have been good to have some active exercises for readers to act on ‘mindful communication’ in real life.

The introductory part has ten questions that ask readers to reflect on intercultural communication setting the tone for intercultural issues, e.g., “Can you name a culture in which making eye contact with elders is considered disrespectful? Are you a first generation American?” etc.

Sadri and Flammia use the terms ‘terrorists’ and ‘terrorism’, which feels like gratuitous labelling and contrary to the aim of the book, e.g. ‘in terms of global terrorism and security, we also need the help of others to manage the problem at hand, even though the United States has the most professional and powerful military machine on the planet.’“

Later on we learn about the media impact, but again referring to ‘terrorism’ and ‘terrorists’ is not very neutral. Perhaps in the US this has become a normal part of the national discourse with not many who ask questions or express scepticism about these terms.

Another point, “Beyond the use of the military in countering terrorism, however, we need to seek non-violent methods of ensuring safety and preventing terrorist actions if we wish to avoid escalating violence around the world.” This seems to put the emphasis on defensiveness rather than collaboration and cohabitation of the planet.

I agree with the authors in that “conflicts between nations or ethnic groups are often rooted in historical disputes over territories or natural resources. When we have an understanding of the influence of the past on current situations we can communicate much more effectively with members of other cultures.” History is often overlooked in intercultural work and to the detriment of our effectiveness. Then again, whose history are we talking about as history tends to be written by winners? So it always helps to be cautious even in these matters.

I was happy Sadri and Flammia pointed out that “superficial levels of culture: the adoption of new fashions, cuisine, architecture, or technologies are more easily changed, the deep structure of culture, such as the value placed on the past and ancestors, moral values and religious beliefs is much more resistant to change”. They suggest that when studying other cultures it is useful to understand how visible behaviors are controlled by values and beliefs that are often buried far beneath the surface.

That means observing and asking questions helps us understand the ‘why’ behind people’s behaviors.

When it comes to the main theories of Intercultural Communication, Sadri and Flammia mentioned among others, e.g., Kluckholm and Strodtbeck’s value orientations, Hofstede’s cultural value dimensions, Hall, etc.

It is interesting that Hofstede’s research that was done so many years ago is still quoted as the primary tool for understanding the complex domain of intercultural communication. Sadri and Flammia point out that the five cultural patterns that Hofstede focuses on in his works are crucial to understanding intercultural communication. They further point out that no understanding of intercultural communication can be developed without grasping the core dimensions of individualism versus collectivism and how it relates to all other dimensions of culture, with caution that not all members of a particular culture will adhere to these value frameworks as they don’t account for individual differences. They further maintain that most cultures of the world can be categorized as either individualistic or collectivistic (p. 150).

While we owe a debt of gratitude in the intercultural field to this seminal work, the author’s approach here seems exactly the kind of essentialist extremes that is so strongly rejected by today’s scholarship.

Sadri and Flammia also discuss the term ‘race’, which “has no scientific validity and is primarily a social and political construction as racial distinctions are used to justify and to

enforce social and economic disparities among people.” This means people use these concepts to create barriers between themselves and exclude others who are different. In effect, we should be open-minded and think outside the box.

Another term mentioned was “religion” as Sadri and Flammia state that both ideology and religion can lead to conflict among peoples who do not share one another’s beliefs and wish to impose their own beliefs on other nations. They say that studying international relations can help us understand the role or power in intercultural communication. It can help us understand, but then what? They also looked at cultural imperialism and the impact of the media in it.

Sadri and Flammia point out that each intercultural encounter is unique and will be shaped by the context in which it occurs, the expectations of the communicators involved, and their perceptions of what is at stake in the encounter. It is important that we communicate mindfully and respect each other’s cultural norms. Good point as when looking at communication, context is crucial but unfortunately a lot can be lost if we are not good listeners or do not ask the right questions and make assumptions.

Would the book help reduce anxiety about intercultural encounters by increasing the reader’s knowledge of other cultures and of effective means of intercultural communication, as it had set out to do? Probably not to any significant degree. Only real life and real encounters can do that. We are more connected than ever virtually but do we actually feel closer and more understood? I doubt it - soon we might all be more like machines rather than anything less.

Overall, I found the book theoretical and US-focused. Also, it was not always easy to read as the text layout felt crowded and discouraging. More interactive questions/exercises to reflect on/act on and more exercises to foster intercultural and self-awareness would have been welcome.