

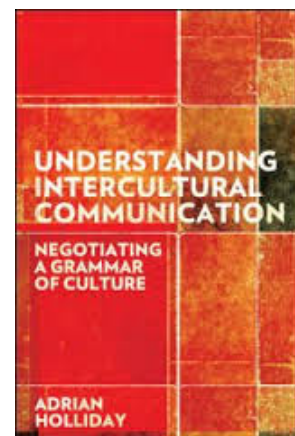
# Holliday, Adrian, *Understanding Intercultural Communication: Negotiating a Grammar of Culture*

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*Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

*Understanding Intercultural Communication* is essentially a textbook aimed at helping students analyze cultural interactions from non-essentialist perspectives. The process is supported by ethnographic narratives within the text and by a variety of online access tools and activities.

Following its highly detailed standard table of contents, the author then offers a five-page layout of "Contents by concept", an attempt to focus attention by what is going on in the text and its relevance to the theme and thesis of what the author is trying to highlight, the constantly constructed cultural contexts and flows of discourse in which we swim daily. When describing culture, the author confirms and challenges our propensity to the naïve belief that the way we look at things is the way they are. The operative words in that statement are "the way we look at things." And each of us has many ways...



The so-called "grammar," in the title refers to an approach previously developed by Holliday and further explored here. It is not grammar in the sense of a linguistic framework but a process diagram, which, when applied describes social and political structures, underlying cultural processes and particular cultural products. These frames are used throughout the book to chart what goes on in various sample interactions. Cultural practices are frequently described, as real but needing interpretation hence the author proscribes "easy answers". He wishes to take a "bottom-up" approach for investigating culture rather than the "top down" positions that result from more essentialist views of cultures as an objective definable realities. Thus his chapters and the activities following them and based on them frequently consult the beliefs, feelings, and experiences of his students to encourage "thick description" as a critical part of discovering the context needed to form cultural connections.

The focus then is on "small culture formation," where most of our cultural interaction inevitably takes place. Small culture formation, according to Holliday, is not to be confused with the literal construction of an identifiable cultural dimension—that would reinforce essentialism—but needs to be understood as the formation of cultural behavior as well as, the understanding of what is going on, at the small level of everyday interpersonal interaction. Inevitably cultural lines can and must be crossed as a part of our daily existence. This is where our culture is constantly being (re)formed and where routinization and the development of a discourse and ultimately of an ideology begin, elements leading to larger forms of identity and cohesion and the norms we determine for what we declare to be "normal."

Beginning with Chapter 6, Holliday begins to deal with the historico-political dimensions of culture formation, where narratives of identity and power impact and shape thinking and behavior, often "explaining" why our values are such as they are. A good deal of this

has to do with the problematic caused by implicit biases, particularly that "the West is best," and in the conscious and unconscious distinction between "the West and the rest," Add to this the perception of "the West as Steward," a more elegant form of the older expression "the white man's burden," and you have the rather heady cocktail intoxicating the movements of globalization.

From historical and other narratives and myths, a discourse is constructed This is the language that represents our ideas of how things are, reifying our sense of identity, defining values and their behavioral consequences. Exploring cultural environments then requires us to examine not only what our discourses define, but perhaps more importantly impose on us the obligation to search for what gets left out, ignored, rejected, what is not seen nor valued—and therefore “doesn’t exist.”

How does one then replace, manage or even undo discourse? Political correctness is one attempt. At this point, in my opinion, the chapters tend to take what feels like a moral high ground and become somewhat preachy. It purports to being an arbitrator of who is biased, prejudiced, and what behaviors can be relabeled as forms of racism. This is perhaps the result of a prevailing discourse of diversity work, which tends to relish in looking for hurt, and cultivates the choice to feel hurt and victimized, rather than curious, in the face of uncomfortable difference. If cultural realities, in less essentialist terms, have blurred boundaries, they still seem here to retain their core. Thus one should be both aware of and wary of relativism, which throws up its hands, when it feels like curiosity and creativity have been exhausted. There are insights here, but no pat answers to discourse management.

The book deliberately avoids identifying country and ethnic cultures in the narratives it offers, with the result that the reader’s mind automatically tries to search them out, demonstrating the depth to which these classifications and the propensity to essentialize have entered our mental paradigms for cultures, or for “cultural environments,” as the author chooses to describe them. At the same time, it feels as if too many of the narratives, belong to a generation perhaps in her 20s to early 30s, giving one the sense that identity formation is much in flux among the protagonists and raising the question of how to use the “grammar” in different generational contexts.

It is both a difficult book to read as well as to summarize, heavily British in its sources and references. However, the process suggested is worth testing as we move toward reframing our understanding of cultural dynamics. It would be interesting to see this operative in the classroom orchestrated by the author. Otherwise, to some degree, one has the sense of having read the libretto but not seen the performance. The book takes positive steps toward the inclusion of new media and I think we are all looking forward to the moment when there is a more seamless integration of media in pedagogy and personal study habits. Technology keeps widening the possibilities and multiplying the choices, making integration and sustainable learning equivalent to stagnation.