

A Theoretical Basis of Intercultural Communication Competence: Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory

George Yip (D.Miss. - Trinity Evangelical Divinity School)
Senior Pastor of North York Grace Gospel Church, Toronto, Canada
Former missionary to Japan (OMF)

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INTRODUCTION

Effective intercultural communication is a lesson that every cross-cultural worker has to master. There are plenty of resources, training sessions, and courses to help cross-cultural workers developing their "intercultural communication competence" (ICC) ; yet there is a lack of discussion among missiologists on the theoretical basis of effective ICC. This article seeks to introduce one main theory on effective ICC: Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory of effective communication. Instead of a detailed description of the theory, I will selectively deal with those aspects of the theory that are relevant to the focus of this article, i.e. how to communicate effectively by developing ICC.

Based on the foundational work of Spitzberg and Cupach^[1] on interpersonal communication competence, a widely accepted framework for ICC was established by Spitzberg^[2], who defines ICC as "very broadly as an impression that behaviour is appropriate and effective in a given context."^[3] This definition introduces one of the main qualities of ICC: effectiveness. Even though Gudykunst's theory introduced here is called Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, the main desired outcome is not reducing anxiety and uncertainty but effective communication, which is the same as that of ICC.^[4]

A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After World War II, the United States became a world power and began sending many diplomats around the world. As they interacted with the local people, they became aware of the importance of learning the local languages; and consequently a number of nationals were employed as language advisors. In order to relate to these language advisors the Foreign Department invited the anthropologist E. T. Hall to teach the diplomats concerning culture. Employing primarily an experiential model of training, Hall was the first person to use the term “intercultural communication.”^[5]

The US Foreign Service in Japan, which was one of the closest ally of the United States, developed one of the best courses on intercultural communication and produced some excellent scholars, including William B. Gudykunst. Gudykunst is a well-known scholar, a long-time professor at California State University at Fullerton, and a prolific writer.

The original emphasis of intercultural communication was on the practical side of communicating effectively as seen in the original experiential model of Hall. It was in the 1970s that theories began to be developed and in the 1980s that systematic theories began to appear.^[6]

Gudykunst’s AUM theory was developed over a period of almost twenty years. At first he developed a model of intergroup communication that integrated uncertainty reduction theory and social identity theory. Later he incorporated the research on anxiety reduction to explain intercultural adaptation and to aim at effective interpersonal and intergroup communication. The final version presented in this article comes from the 2005 version.^[7]

Gudykunst was influenced by a number of scholars in developing the AUM theory. One was Georg Simmel, who proposed the concept of social type as being cast by the specifiable reactions and expectations of others. The type becomes what others expect him to be in specific way. One important social type is “the stranger.” A stranger is one who comes today and stays tomorrow; but his position is determined by the fact that he does not belong to the group from the beginning and he may leave again. A stranger is an element of the group while not being fully part of it. Being distant and near at the same time, he will often be called on as a confidant; and, being not bound by cultural commitments he is the ideal intermediary in the traffic of goods and emotions.^[8] Based on this concept, Gudykunst refers to a stranger as someone we do not know and who are in an unfamiliar cultural environment.^[9]

Other influences include writings on uncertainty, work on intergroup communication, research on intergroup anxiety, and the concept of mindfulness.^[10]

AUM THEORY

AUM theory can be applied to effective communication or acculturation; but this article focuses only on effective communication. According to Gudykunst, “communication is effective to the extent that the person interpreting the message attaches a meaning to the message that is relatively similar to what was intended by the person transmitting it.”^[11] It is important to note that this understanding of effectiveness focuses on the communication of message, and it is under strong critique as being culturally biased, as I shall delineate at the end of this article.

AUM theory states that when we interact with strangers, there will always be a sense of uncertainty and anxiety. In a cross-cultural situation, uncertainty and anxiety arise because of cultural differences and a lack of understanding of cultural rules. Uncertainty is a cognitive

phenomenon. Predictive uncertainty involves our inability to predict strangers' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behaviour. Explanatory uncertainty involves our inability to explain strangers' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, and behaviour.^[12] Anxiety is the affective equivalent of uncertainty. We have minimum and maximum thresholds for anxiety. The maximum thresholds are the highest amount of anxiety we can have and feel comfortable interacting with strangers. Obviously, when anxiety exceeds the maximum thresholds we stop interacting. The minimum thresholds are the lowest amount of anxiety we can have and care about our interactions with strangers. When our anxiety is below the minimum thresholds, we do not care what happens and do not have any curiosity about what might happen. Therefore when our anxiety is too high or too low, we cannot communicate effectively.^[13]

There are forty-seven axioms in AUM theory. The center of the theory is Axiom 39, which states:

An increase in our ability to manage our anxiety about interacting with strangers *and* an increase in the accuracy of our predictions and explanations regarding their behaviour will produce an increase in the effectiveness of our communication.^[14]

According to this axiom, in order to communicate effectively we need to manage appropriately our uncertainty and anxiety. It should be added that Gudykunst does not say that managing our uncertainty and anxiety well will lead to effective communication. What he says is that under such condition we can mindfully try to understand strangers and how strangers are interpreting our messages; and when we do so we can respond in such a way that leads to effective communication. Thus management of uncertainty and anxiety paves that way to effective communication; but effective communication still depends on what we do under such condition.^[15]

SELF-CONCEPTS AND AUM

Self-concepts, or our views of ourselves, consist of personal identity and social identity. Our self-esteem is the positive or negative feelings we have about ourselves. Personal identities are the major generative mechanisms for interpersonal behavior; while social identities are the major generative mechanisms for intergroup behavior. When we perceive strangers to be atypical members of their groups, we do not treat them based on their group memberships; and then our communication is guided by our personal identities. Strangers are no longer stereotyped, and we interact with them as individuals. Furthermore, a secure self-esteem helps in avoiding biases. Therefore, according to axioms 1 to 4, in order to decrease anxiety, we need to increase the degree to which our social identities guide our interactions if our social identities are secure. Furthermore, an increase in our self-esteem will produce a decrease in our anxiety.^[16]

These axioms point to the need of helping cross-cultural missionaries in several ways. One is the importance of holding a healthy self-esteem based on a healthy self-identity. In a cross-cultural situation, a missionary with a low self-esteem may have a tendency to withdraw from interaction. A low self-esteem can easily lead to misunderstanding others, personalizing comments, and other problems in communication.

These axioms also point to the importance of holding healthy social identities. A sense of the superiority of one's group (such as the superiority of national civilization) can lead to ethnocentrism. Mission history is filled with such examples. On the other hand, a negative image of one's social identities can also lead to misunderstanding, increased uncertainty and anxiety. This pertains to missionaries from minority groups in a multiethnic nation such as Asian or African missionaries from the West. If there is an attitude of inferiority or being a victim of discrimination, such attitude will negatively affect the outcome of intercultural communication.

REACTIONS TO STRANGERS AND AUM

Axioms 10 to 14 and 18 to 22 are concerned with reactions to strangers. To decrease uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural communication one needs to cultivate the ability to process complex information about strangers, flexibility of attitude, tolerance of ambiguity, and empathy.^[17]

1. Ability to process complex information about strangers

The more we are able to process information complexly the more we search for alternative explanations for strangers' behaviour. Consequently we are more capable of understanding strangers than cognitively simple people.^[18]

2. Flexibility of attitude

Rigid and divisive attitude tend to lead to ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and prejudice. Ethnocentrism is an attitude that regards one's own group as the center of everything and that all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.^[19] One cannot avoid certain degree of ethnocentrism; but overly strong ethnocentrism lead to misunderstanding and prejudice.

Stereotyping is a result of categorization. Social categorization refers to the way we order our social environment by grouping people into categories that make sense to us. The more familiar we are with outgroups, the greater is our perceived differentiation of these groups; and with that the less is our tendency to treat all members in a similar negative fashion. Furthermore, when we categorize strangers we form expectations for strangers' behaviour. Negative expectations lead to uncertainty and anxiety; while positive expectations help us manage uncertainty and anxiety.^[20] One cannot avoid social categorization; but with mindfulness and the proper attitude one can avoid stereotyping.

Prejudice comes from stereotyping and the attachment of value judgment to the stereotype. Prejudice can be positive or negative; but usually it refers to negative attitude.

To counter stereotyping one needs to be aware of the effect of categorization. With such awareness one can use decategorization, wide categorization, and recategorization to improve on intercultural communication. For example, if there is a stereotype of every American as individualistic, one can broaden the definition of individualism to include some aspects of collectivism (wide categorization). In recategorization, when one meets an American one can look at that person not only as an American but also as male or female, as old or young, as belonging to certain professional class, and so on.

3. Tolerance of ambiguity

Tolerance is the ability to deal successfully with situations, even when a lot of information needed to interact effectively is unknown. The greater our tolerance for ambiguity the less anxiety we experience. Tolerance for ambiguity also affects the type of information we try to find out about strangers. If we have a low tolerance, we tend to base our judgments on our first impressions; and we tend to gather information that supports our stereotypes. If we have a high tolerance, we tend to be open to new information and we seek objective information about strangers.^[21]

4. Empathy

Cognitively, empathy leads to taking the perspective strangers, and in so doing it leads to seeing the world from the strangers' point of view. Affectively, the empathic person experiences the emotions of another. Communicatively, the empathic individual signals understanding and

concern through verbal and nonverbal cues.^[22] Increase in empathy will decrease uncertainty and anxiety.

CONNECTIONS WITH STRANGERS AND AUM

Axioms 27 to 31 point out the following factors to decrease uncertainty and anxiety: increase in the quantity and quality of our contact with strangers, increase in our interdependence with strangers, increase in the intimacy of our relationships with strangers, and increase in the networks we share with strangers.^[23]

It is commonly known that in order to communicate effectively, a missionary needs to bond with the local people. An increase in the quantity and quality of contact, and an increase in the intimacy of relationship with local people will decrease uncertainty and anxiety. In developing relationship with the local people it is important to cultivate an interdependent relationship instead of a dependent or independent relationship. Missionaries tend to self-dependent; but if they do not learn to rely on the local people they will not develop and interdependent relationship.

MINDFULNESS AND AUM

Axioms 37 to 38 point out a very important factor in decreasing uncertainty and anxiety: mindfulness.^[24]

Mindfulness involves creating new categories, being open to new information, and recognizing strangers' perspectives. Mindful ways of learning about strangers revolves around certain psychological states:

1. openness to novelty;

2. alertness to distinctions;
3. sensitivity to different contexts;
4. implicit, if not explicit, awareness of multiple perspectives; and
5. orientation in the present.^[25]

Normally we are not mindful in interacting with others. This is both a skill to learn and an attitude to be adopted constantly in intercultural communication.

AREAS TO FOCUS ON IN DEVELOPING ICC

At the beginning of this article I point out an important quality of ICC: effective communication. Gudykunst provides us with a theoretical foundation to understand the factors leading to effective communication. Therefore in training for ICC we must focus on the following areas:

1. Developing healthy self-concepts including healthy self-identities and social identities
2. Correcting ethnocentrism
3. Dealing with stereotyping
4. Increasing tolerance for ambiguity
5. Increasing empathy
6. Improving reactions to strangers by active listening and proper feedback
7. Developing mindfulness

Since many of these areas involves not only a cognitive transfer of knowledge but, more importantly, a transformation of attitude and life, trainers of missionaries or cross-cultural workers need to think through on the appropriate method of training. It seems that the Western method of academic school cannot achieve this purpose. While the transfer of knowledge is

needed, it is not the most important thing. The discipling and mentoring method used by Jesus and now many missionary training schools in the Majority World is a better model to achieve the purpose.

CRITIQUE OF AUM THEORY

There have been several critiques of Gudykunst's AUM theory dealing with the validation of the theory, cognition, and effectiveness.

Validation of the Theory

One critique is that the theory is too complex involving 47 axioms and 37 variables. It is extremely difficult to validate the theory through qualitative analysis.^[26] Even so, several studies have validated parts of the theory,^[27] although Gudykunst did acknowledge that some parts of the theory cannot be validated scientifically.^[28]

Cognition

Another critique is that Gudykunst puts too much emphasis on consciousness and the cognition. Uncertainty and mindfulness have to do with cognition; but communication is above all relational and involves affection and even irrational behaviour; and it also involves the spiritual aspect. In reply to this, Gudykunst points out that his theory does not focus on cognition alone but also on affection; especially the concept of mindfulness is concerned with both cognition, affection, and relationship.^[29]

Effectiveness

One more important critique that is of particular concern in this article is about the meaning and significance of effectiveness. Masaki Yoshitake criticizes Gudykunst for being ethnocentric in placing such an emphasis on effectiveness.^[30] Furthermore, what are the criteria in evaluating effectiveness? As pointed earlier, Gudykunst focuses on the communication of

message in defining effective communication; that is, effective communication occurs when the receiver attaches a meaning to the message that is isomorphic to the intended meaning of the sender. Such a view of effectiveness has been critiqued as Eurocentric and is only appropriate in a Western individualistic culture. In a globalized world today we need other viewpoints concerning effectiveness.^[31]

This last critique deserves some further thinking. I want to point out the following areas in considering intercultural communication effectiveness.

1. The nature of relationship

Communication of messages takes place in the larger context of relationship.

Relationship, by nature, is a process developing over time. In intercultural relationships one needs to consider several factors that affect communication effectiveness.

One factor is development of relationship in time. It is possible that an intercultural communicator has developed such a close relationship with the local people that in spite of committing many mistakes that cause misunderstanding; the communicator is still considered an effective one. Often in long-term relationship minor miscommunications are tolerated. We all know missionaries who have cultivated close relationship with the local people even though they continue to make some cultural mistakes.

Another factor is the universal aspects of all cultures. It is commonly acknowledged today by anthropologists that the universal aspects of all cultures far exceed the cultural differences. By nature anthropology and intercultural studies place their emphasis on cultural differences, thus accentuating the need for communication effectiveness vis-à-vis cultural differences. An intercultural communicator may establish a close relationship with the local people through the universal aspects of both cultures, even though he/she may not have mastered

the culture and language of the local people and has not communicated messages effectively. In this case he/she may still be regarded as an effective communicator.

2. The goal of communication and culture

Effectiveness is measured by whether goals are achieved or not. In an individualistic culture in which low-context communication predominates the goal of communicating messages effectively is highly valued.

In a collectivistic culture harmony in relationship is the goal of communication.

Yoshitake Miike considers harmony to be a key element of Asian worldview.^[32] From the perspective of Asiatic communication theory Chen and Starosta write,

Axiologically, harmony pervades the interdependent connectedness of the great whole of the universe. As the core Asian cultural value, harmony is treated as the end rather than the means of human communication. Thus, human communication is not a process in which interactants exert power to direct the interaction in their own favor, but they rather communicate with dignity and influence in a mutual and interdependent network on the basis of cooperation. In other words, harmony in the process of communications represents a kind of ethical appeal that can induce a sense of duty for cooperation with the other party, not by the communicator's strategic words but by the sincere display of whole-hearted concern with the other. Harmony is then the ultimate goal of Asian communication, and Asians use it as the guidance of regulating the transforming and never-ending process of human communication.^[33]

When a communicator in Asian culture achieves harmony in relating to Asians, he/she is communicating effectively even if on some occasions his/her message is not communicated effectively.

3. The outcome of communication depends on mutual adaptation

The result of communicating messages depends on both the sender and the receiver. The effort of the sender, no matter how appropriate it is, will not result in effective communication if the receiver does not take the appropriate response. Communication is not a mechanical process

such that managing communication well will automatically result in the acceptance of the message.

When we consider all these areas that affect our understanding of effectiveness we can see that Gudykunst's theory is partial and incomplete. Having said that, I believe that Gudykunst provides a theory that contributes to communication effectiveness irrespective of cultural contexts.

CONCLUSION

Gydukunst's AUM theory is one of the few fully developed theories that provide the foundation of ICC. As such it is a significant contribution to the development of ICC study. It also points out some major areas that every intercultural communicator needs to master in order to communicate messages effectively.

The theory focuses on communicating messages effectively and is therefore partial and incomplete as far as the whole picture of effective communication is concerned. However, in its limited scope the theory provides principles (or axioms) that can lead to communicating messages effectively, which is an important aspect of effective communication. It provides some of the necessary factors to communicate effectively; what we do with such knowledge is the next step towards effective intercultural communication.

Notes

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³ Ibid. 379.

⁴ William B. Gudykunst, An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication, in W. B. Gudykunst, ed., *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 2005), 282.

⁵ Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, Notes in the history of intercultural communication: The Foreign Service Institute and the mandate for intercultural training, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76(3) (1990), 262-281.

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¹⁰ Ibid., 281.

¹¹ Ibid., 289.

¹² Ibid., 286.

¹³ Ibid., 287-288.

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- ¹⁷ Ibid., 297-300.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 296.
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- ²⁰ William B. Gudykunst, An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication: Making the mesh of the net finer, in W. B. Gudykunst, ed., *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE 2005), 298.
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- ²² Ibid., 260.
- ²³ William B. Gudykunst, An anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theory of effective communication: Making the mesh of the net finer, in W. B. Gudykunst, ed., *Theorizing about Intercultural Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE 2005), 302-303.
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³⁰ Ibid., 182-184.

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