

Unit T 2.7: Intercultural communication misunderstandings

1. Summary

The reasons for intercultural misunderstandings can be very different: One important cause is the reference of the participants to different reference codes. Intercultural misunderstandings cause irritation, fear, uncertainty, and sometimes even aggression.

There are different "repair" strategies in situations of intercultural misunderstanding. If these strategies are not successful, cultural misunderstandings can - in extreme cases - lead to racism. Negotiation methods such as the Harvard Negotiation Project are helpful.

2. Intercultural communication misunderstandings

There are different ways in which members of a socio-cultural context communicate with each other. One important difference is the degree of "directness" or "indirectness" of a communication. Directness is particularly evident in the way requests are formulated, formulas of politeness are articulated, one's own opinions are expressed and statements made by participants in the conversation are criticized.

Case study: German and French negotiation and formulation methods

"The rather direct way of German communication partners to contradict, to express criticism and to formulate contrary opinions can, for example, come across as impolite to French interlocutors. They tend to express opinions indirectly, for example by relativizing them in the form of subjunctive usage. French interlocutors often report that Germans not only negotiate very hard, but also express this in a very direct communication style, for example in statements such as: 'No, that's not possible. The price is €10.50'. In French, on the other hand, there is a clear tendency to formulate such statements in an indirect way, for example in the form: 'I don't know if it is possible to lower the price below 10.50 €, but I will try to do something about it'.

Forms of directness or indirectness can also be observed in the styles of presentation that R. Meyer-Kalkus has observed and analyzed very precisely for Germany and France in the university area and describes it as follows: 'The playful entry into the thesis exposition by Frenchmen, inductively collecting scattered observations, from which conclusions are then drawn en passant; in contrast, the theoretical-methodological impetus of German researchers, who serve up as a prelude to their expositions historical-philosophical or epistemological presuppositions of the hardest caliber, in the opinion that this is helpful to

the transparency of their argumentation.' - the French's fun in incidentals, anecdotes, and the absurdities and abstrusities inherent in the matter, which are pointed out with gestural-mimic talent; the Germans, on the other hand, who point to the newly opened sources or to the novelty of the theoretical approach' (Meyer-Kalkus 1990: 694)".

It is obvious that such different methods of rhetoric and negotiation can quickly give rise to ill-feeling, misunderstandings or even aversions. I myself remember a series of party meetings in which French-speaking and German-speaking speakers appeared. A politician from French-speaking Switzerland always began his intervention with the words: "Deux mots seulement" (something to the effect of "just two words") - and then we knew that he would speak for at least an hour - usually with a great deal of wit and charm, many examples and anecdotes, intellectually brilliant and in a sweeping yet precise speaking style.

2.1 Intercultural non-understanding and intercultural misunderstanding

Christian Giordano, an ethnologist who teaches in Fribourg/Switzerland, suggested using the concept of misunderstanding as an analytical category in inter- or transcultural communication processes: This is because "this term apparently combines two levels; namely, it attempts to address disparities, tensions, and manipulations from the point of view of those affected by the interaction process, i.e., from the 'subjectively intended meaning' of the agents. More precisely and concretely formulated: Intercultural misunderstandings arise when members of two different cultures interpret the contact or interaction situation in which they are involved differently, even contradictorily or oppositely, and act accordingly. The actors come from two mutually alien, historically shaped spheres of experience and consequently possess throughout the course of action - to use M. Weber's terminology - no common 'subjectively intended meaning'" (Giordano 1992:199), i.e. they operate as two incompatible or hardly compatible decoding mechanisms - or just: socio-cultural codes (cf. on this Jäggi 2009). According to Giordano (1992:200), such misunderstandings or intercultural dissonances result from diverging "cultural grammars".

However, intercultural misunderstandings can also result from inadequate knowledge of one's own - or others' - socio-cultural codes. Another possible cause of intercultural misunderstandings can be that the two socio-cultural reference codes are incompatible and

it is not clear which reference code now applies. As a rule, people unconsciously and automatically fall back on their own familiar socio-cultural code - even if it does not apply in the current environment.

Case study: On the Russian-Chinese border

Once in the 1980s, when I wanted to buy mineral water at a train station on the Russian-Chinese border in China, I asked the clerk in English and Russian, "Is this mineral water?" and "Eta mineralnaja bada?" When the clerk nodded with a polite smile, our tour group bought a larger number of the bottles of a transparent liquid, which were labeled only in Chinese. It was not until a Chinese officer on the platform looked at our group - which consisted mostly of women - in complete bewilderment and made a circular motion with his right hand at head level that we realized that we had all bought a high-proof rice liquor.

I had concluded from the polite nod - according to our cultural code - that the Chinese had answered my question in the affirmative. In China, however, people also smile when they don't understand a question - they are polite to a guest.

As long as **generally accepted behavioral patterns** exist which are reproduced again and again through corresponding actions - for example, in everyday behavior - social communication between different cultural, ethnic and social groups runs more or less without problems. Difficulties arise, however, when different behaviors are used as a frame of reference for everyday behavior - or different codes of reference.

An amusing example of linguistic-cultural misunderstandings was reported by Christian Giordano (1992:200/201):

European university teacher A has been offered a guest lectureship at a university in the Rio de la Plata region (Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay) and has accepted it with great enthusiasm. A has limited but sufficient linguistic knowledge acquired in Spain to be able to teach the courses in the local language. He also starts from the questionable self-evidence that within the Ibero-American "cultural circle" the same words have grosso modo identical meanings. Accordingly, he prepares his lectures rather carefully and calmly. However, since A has a certain routine in lecturing, right at the beginning of the lectures he is somewhat surprised to find that certain nouns, adjectives, verbs and phrases he uses do not produce the intended effect on the audience. This fact turns out to be quite blatant in the case of the time word "coger" used by A in numerous contexts, which in Spain quite harmlessly means "to take", "to grasp", "to seize". "Cogelo!" can consequently be translated as "take it", "take it", "prendilo", etc.

During the lecture, however, A observes that most of the listeners, a group of well-bred post-graduates, have to grin incomprehensibly as soon as "coger" is mentioned, which can mean sympathy, of course, but at the same time slight, albeit benevolent, sanction of deviant behavior. The mystery is solved for A only a few days later, when the inviting lecturer, who has personally followed the lectures of his guest, explains to A during a

cheerful car trip that "coger" in Rioplatense is actually the vulgar and socially tabooed term to express - formulated in salon fashion - the act of coitus.

This example shows that even within the same language environment - in this case Spanish - significant linguistic intercultural misunderstandings can also occur because the same language sometimes codes analogous or similar situations differently.

Heike Bartholy (1992:176) pointed out that communication barriers can occur either as non-understanding or as misunderstanding. In the case of nonunderstanding, there is "no common system of 'language symbols,'" whereas misunderstanding occurs when there is a mutually accepted system of language symbols, but it is interpreted or used differently by the communication participants. In the case of communication difficulties with different mother tongues, a third language is often chosen as a medium of communication. In this way, both communication partners are aware of the difficulties in terms of content. However, if the native language of one of the two communication participants is chosen as the medium of communication, the communication partner whose native language is chosen as the medium may "forget" that an intercultural communication situation exists, and the greater the language competence of the other partner, the more likely it is that this will be the case. This results in communication problems in terms of content (Cf. Bartholy 1992:180).

If both sides cultivate anticipatory - i.e. anticipatory - corrective behavior - even insurmountable difficulties can arise (in extreme cases):

Case study: Shaking hands

"Regarding the case in which both communication partners are aware of the existence of cultural differences in routine actions and are confronted with almost insoluble problems in their efforts to respond to the particularities of the other partner, the following example could be given: If a Japanese, in whose culture shaking hands is not customary, meets a German, whose preference for this kind of greeting is known to him, and, taking this knowledge into account, he extends his hand to him, the German, who knows the Japanese customs in this situation, is faced with a dilemma: If he does not grasp the hand because he wants to show his partner courtesy in the Japanese sense, he may offend him; if he grasps the hand nevertheless, the Japanese is thus left in the dark about his knowledge of Japanese customs, which initially prevents him from arriving at a correct definition of the communicative relationship" (Bartholy 1992:184).

2.2 Types of communication misunderstandings

Communication misunderstandings can occur in intercultural contexts at different levels:

- Different reference codes of communication participants.
- Communication participants are not aware that they are referring to different reference codes.
- Communication participant does not fully know his/her code/reference code.
- Misunderstanding is deliberately used as a means of conflict.
- Reference code is ambiguous.
- Communication participant refers to contradictory code fragments.
- Double-bind situation.

2.3 Indicators of possible intercultural communication misunderstandings.

Indicators for possibly existing communication misunderstandings can be:

- (Own) uncertainty/irritation.
- Embarrassment
- Unexpected reactions of the counterpart
- Cheerfulness of the environment
- Own aggression or aggression of the counterpart
- ...

Case study: walking arm in arm and kissing

In some African countries, men like to walk arm in arm on the street. In doing so, they express their friendship or sympathy. In contrast, in Western Europe or North America, two men walking arm in arm is quickly associated with "homosexuality."

Conversely, public kissing between men and women is common and accepted in Western countries. In contrast, people in Arab countries often associate a public kiss with prostitution, and in some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, kissing in public is even prosecuted.

In both cases, the corresponding behavior leads to irritation on the part of the foreign observer - and intercultural misunderstandings and false attributions are programmed.

Allerdings können diese Anzeichen auch andere Gründe haben, z.B. grober Verstoss gegen den eigenen sozio-kulturellen Code, aus welchen Gründen auch immer.

2.4 Strategies for communication misunderstandings:

In the case of communicative misunderstandings, it is not uncommon for communication partners to take precautions to avoid the occurrence of misunderstandings. Possible methods are, for example, an extension of the tolerance frame or anticipatory repair measures (cf. Bartholy 1992:184).

A good method of dealing with cultural misunderstanding is to make misunderstanding itself the topic of communication, i.e., to engage in "metacommunication" - that is, communication about communication. The condition for this, however, is that cultural differences (and misunderstandings) are recognized as such in the first place (cf. Bartholy 1992:186).

If intercultural communication misunderstandings have occurred, there are a number of strategies and methods to recognize the misunderstanding on the one hand and to correct it on the other. The following behaviors are conceivable in such situations:

1. Analyze the codes to be used
2. is there agreement on the applicable reference code?
3. analyze the interests of the communication participants
4. address misunderstanding (humor!)
5. anticipatory behavior
6. determine common reference code
7. recognize (possibly) pathological situation (e.g. double bind)
8. ...

Intercultural misunderstandings often consist of a shorter or longer sequence of events that are not understood or are misunderstood on the background of one's own (reference) code.

Possible consequences may include:

- ▶ Communication process breaks off, either momentarily or even for a longer period of time.
- ▶ Defensive attitudes are reinforced (on both sides or on one side)
- ▶ A conflictual communication system develops (e.g., war)
- ▶ A meta-communication process is created

Only the fourth possibility contains (short-term effective) correction possibilities. Furthermore, a fifth possibility exists:

- ▶ A meta-communication level is not sought, but another, more successful communication level: for example, a stalled negotiation is interrupted in order to have lunch together.

Examples of meta-communication might include:

- Humorous rehashing (e.g., laughing, explaining, etc.)
- Verbal reappraisal (expressing that there appears to be a misunderstanding).
- Signaling non-understanding (either linguistically: "what does..." or in terms of content)
- Asking, what do you intend by this activity, this behavior...?

Switching to another level of communication can be done by, among other things:

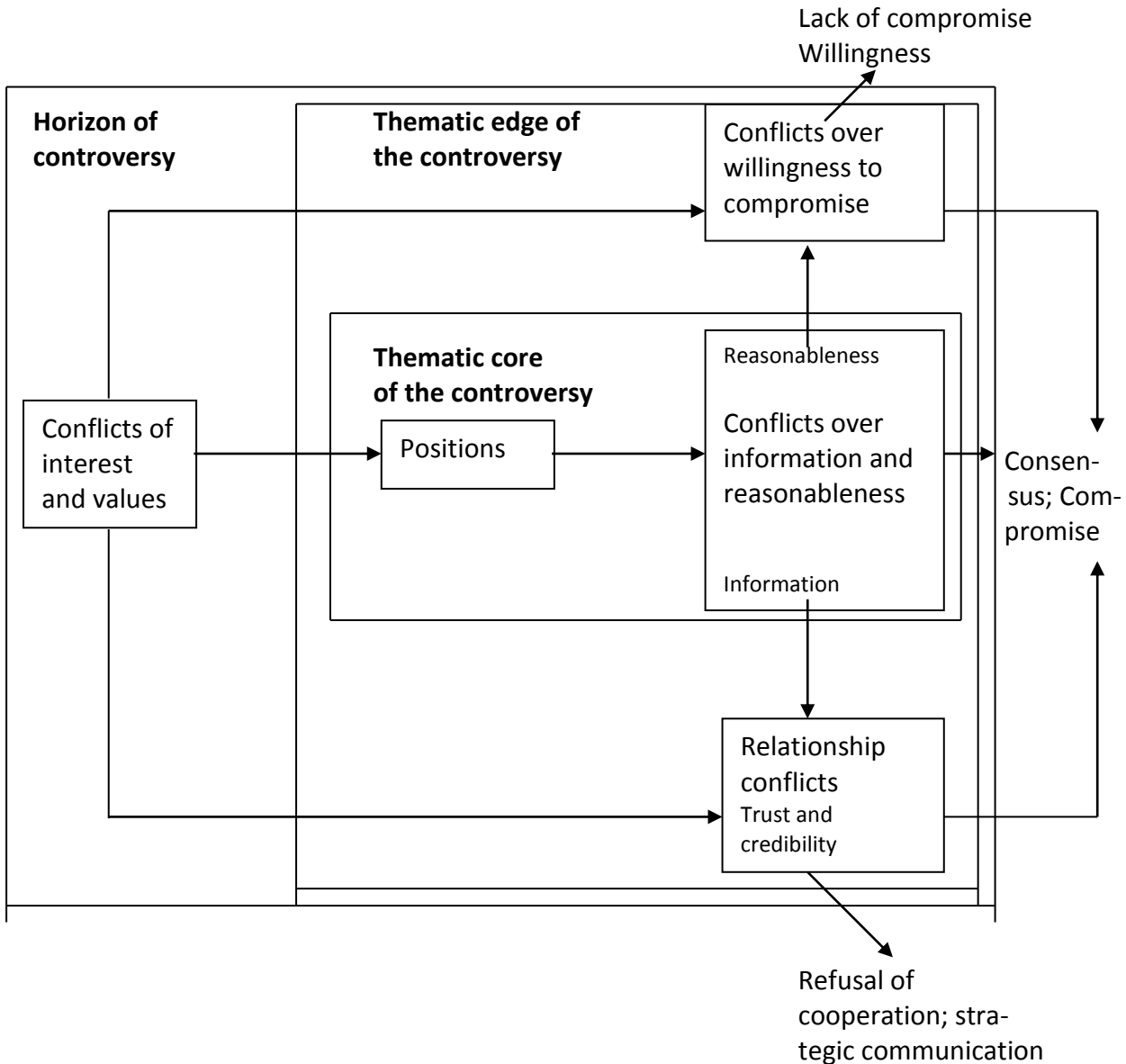
- Inviting for a drink or a meal;
- Showing interest in the other country (e.g., tourism opportunities);
- Starting a conversation about the family.

2.5 The Harvard Negotiation Project

A special method for dealing with communication misunderstandings in negotiation situations is the negotiation method developed in the "Harvard Negotiation Project". The

method was developed by Fisher/Ury (1984) at Harvard University. The Harvard Negotiation Method assumes very different, nested conflict levels and contexts:

Conflict levels and dynamics:



Source: Wiedemann/Femer/Hennen 1991:51, after Lederle 1995:137. Note: The same scheme is also reproduced in ► Unit K5: "Conflict Types," but there to reflect the different levels of conflict and actors.

The Harvard concept culminates in four central instructions or negotiation directives (cf. Eiholzer 1998:19):

1. Treat people and problems separately!
2. Focus not on positions but on interests!
3. Develop different choices or solution options before making a decision!
4. Base the agreement and the result of the negotiation on objective, "fair" decision criteria!

These four principles can also be applied in intercultural situations, but only if a negotiation setting exists or has been created. With the four principles of the Harvard Negotiation Project, a situation of intercultural conflict or intercultural misunderstanding can be raised to a level where creative solutions can be found for both sides.

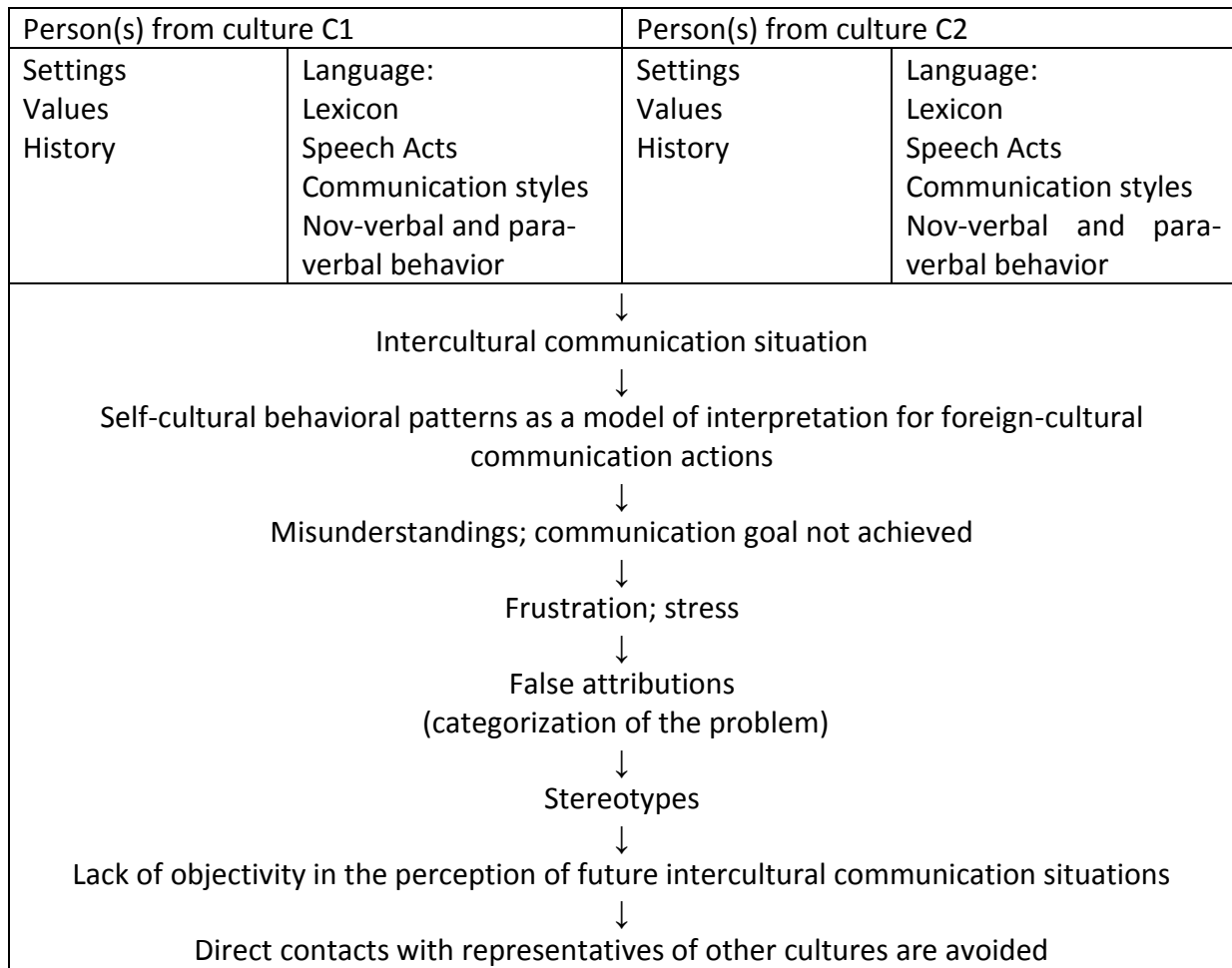
2.6 Possible consequences of intercultural misunderstandings

Intercultural misunderstandings often arise almost unnoticed, but can gradually accentuate and intensify over time. The following diagram by Müller-Jasquier 2004 (quoted from Lüsebrink 2008:46) shows this mechanism very nicely:

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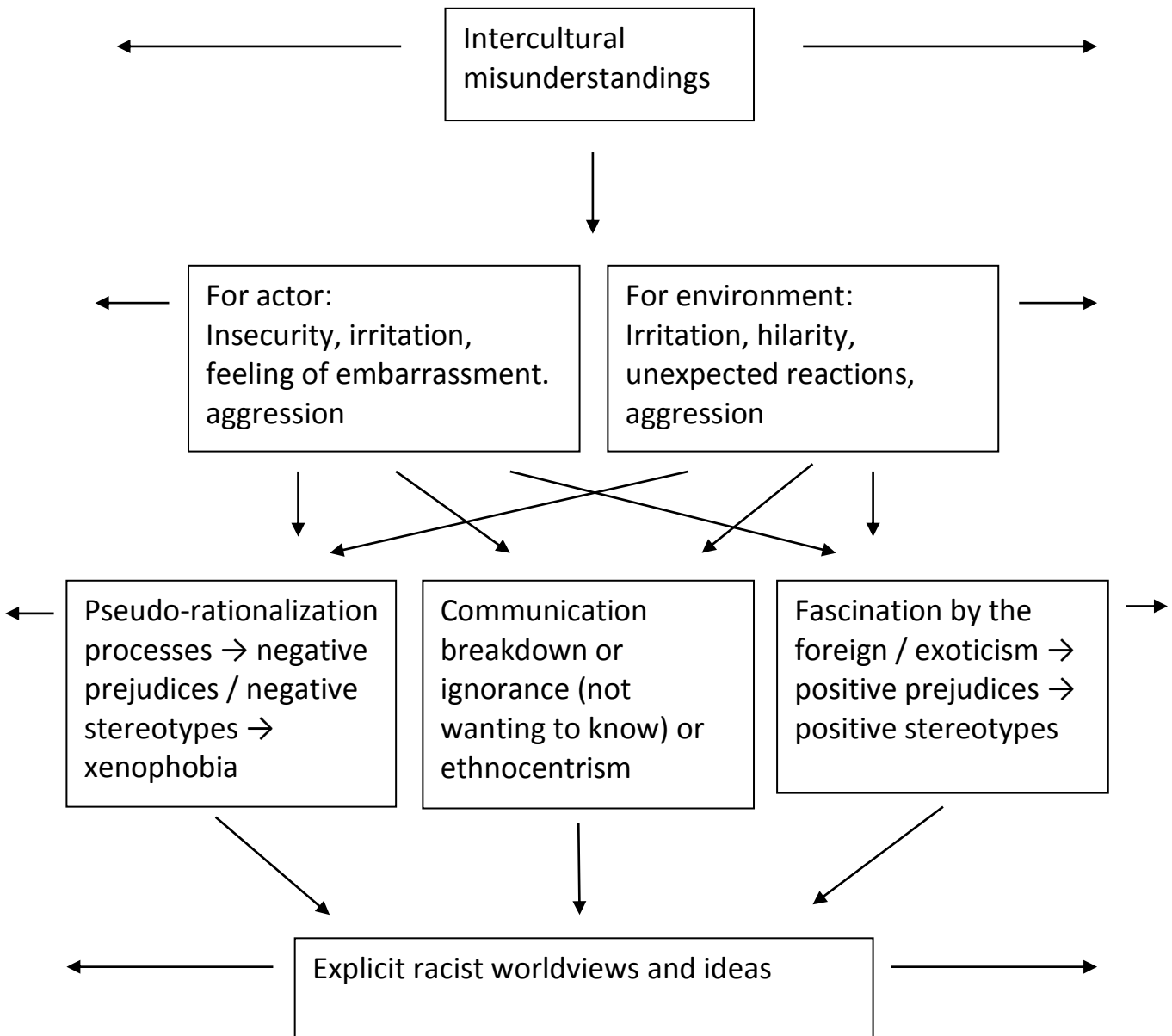


However, intercultural misunderstandings can also lead to massive problems and violent conflicts: Namely, to dissatisfaction, massive insecurity, aggression, violence - and in extreme cases to racism:

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However, the representation is incomplete: At each level, the process can also break off or lead in a different direction (hence the sideways arrows). The fact that this often happens is proven by practice: by far not every cultural misunderstanding leads - fortunately! - leads to racism. But it can do so - under certain internal and external conditions.

2.7 Intercultural Procedural Ethics as a Solution?

As we have seen, intercultural conflicts are characterized by the fact that they either lack a common value framework or that common values between the parties are only fragmentary. Therefore, Anne Isabel Kraus (2011:70) has developed a basic ethical model for

intercultural procedural ethics. In doing so, she formulated the following key points for such an intercultural procedural ethics:

- It does not start with individual concrete conflict situations or conflict cases, but with the collective, normative structures that produce the conflicts.
- It is characterized by a contextualist perspective in that it "recognizes the cultural diversity and particularity of moral standpoints as given and legitimate and seeks to integrate them systematically into theory" (Kraus 2011:70).
- The approach is interest-based.
- It takes a transformational approach "insofar as mediation is intended to overcome the indirect structural violence of mutual moral devaluation and the mutual exclusivity of claims and to facilitate more constructive interaction" (Kraus 2011:70/71).
- It is situation-oriented and continuously adapts the procedure to the current situation.

Kraus (2011:122-123) suggests seven steps in her intercultural procedural ethics:

1. The participatory conclusion of a working alliance by the participants,
2. Clarification of the contextual meanings, justification and validity of the positions and differentiations in the procedure with regard to procedure and goals,
3. Agreement on and recognition of procedural positions and procedural goals,
4. Subjective determination of the waivability and divisibility as well as prioritization of functional procedural interests for the purpose of clarifying limitations and potentials for agreement,
5. Comparative evaluation of functional procedural interests and negotiation of optional procedural rules,
6. Agreement on procedural rules acceptable to all parties; and
7. Correction of outcome and procedure.

With the help of these procedural steps - which can be repeated several times - a kind of non-partisan legitimacy emerges, at least according to Kraus (2011:123). In the best case, this metadiscursive procedure leads to interculturally acceptable approaches; in the worst case, conflict negotiation breaks off already here.

From her approach, Kraus (2011:71) adopts a position of "descriptive relativism," which assumes "that morality has a relative truth value and validity because it is grounded in each case in the basic epistemic and moral assumptions and practices of evolved group identities and thus in historically contingent conceptual schemes and frameworks" (Kraus 2011:71). In this regard, Kraus (2011:72) argues that "so-called a priori basic concepts, fundamental ideas of justice such as human dignity or the procedural justice principle of impartiality ... ultimately [are] not universal" (Kraus 2011:72). However, Kraus warns against culturalist relativism because "the overly strict protection of cultural idiosyncrasies ... may lock cultures into certain characteristics, even though they themselves may be much more heterogeneous and mobile" (Kraus 2011:72). For a detailed discussion of the dynamic character of identity, cf. ► Unit I 37: "Cultural Identity and Hybridization Tendencies."

If one advocates - as Kraus (2011:73) does - a "pragmatic universalism," it seems plausible to consider moral standpoints "neither wholly incommensurable nor wholly commensurable" (Kraus 2011:73) - however, the problem then arises of how to deal with this partial incompatibility in a practical, i.e., pragmatic way. Any attempt at objectification remains - at best - bound to the parties involved. Seen in this light, then, "human morality ... from this perspective is a ... flexible space of reflection that can expand and change in interaction with endogenous and exogenous impulses according to certain conditions and to a certain extent" (Kraus 2011:74). So, an intercultural procedural ethics is always variable, forward open, and dependent on the parties involved. But what happens if one of the parties involved is not interested in such a "space of reflection" or if their socio-cultural code does not allow for such intercultural reflection? Two things follow from this: on the one hand, the intercultural procedural ethics postulated by Kraus is nevertheless said to have a universal character, because it assumes a universal willingness to reflect on all cultures and socio-cultural contexts. And on the other hand, the question arises what has to be done in conflicts in which such a cross-party readiness for reflection is missing.

3. Control Questions

1. When do intercultural misunderstandings arise?

2. Why is a third language often chosen as the medium of communication between members of different mother tongues?
3. Name five types of communication misunderstandings!
4. Name five signs of possible intercultural communication misunderstandings!
5. List four ways to shift communication to another level?
6. Name the four principles of the Harvard Negotiation Method.
7. Explain the intermediate steps through which intercultural communication misunderstandings can lead to explicit racism!
8. What does Anne Isabel Kraus understand by "intercultural procedural ethics" and where do you see its strengths and weaknesses?

4. Links

Interlinguale und interkulturelle Missverständnisse

Von Eva Lavric

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/266296184_Interlinguale_und_interkulturelle_Missverstandnisse

Interkulturelle und transkulturelle Kommunikation

Text von Kazuma Matoba und Daniel Scheible

http://www.idm-diversity.org/files/Working_paper3-Matoba-Scheible.pdf

Die Anderen als Fremde – Wir als Fremde: Missverständnisse und

Brücken in der interkulturellen Kommunikation

Von Volker Hinnenkamp

https://www.hs-fulda.de/fileadmin/user_upload/FB_SK/Leseproben/Hinnenkamp_die_anderen_als_fremde.pdf

Interkulturelle Fettnäpfchen: Missverständnisse, Konflikte und Lösungsansätze

<https://crosswater-job-guide.com/archives/54803>

Interkulturelle Missverständnisse in Text und Translation.

Einige Überlegungen am Beispiel des Englischen und Deutschen

Von Heidrun Gerzymisch-Arbogast (Saarbrücken)

<http://tujournals.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/index.php/zif/article/view/532/508>

Harvard Magazine

<http://www.harvardmagazine.com>

**Interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit: Missverständnisse vermeiden
von Wolfgang Imkamp**

<https://www.experto.de/sprachen/interkulturelle-kommunikation/interkulturelle-zusammenarbeit-missverstaendnisse-vermeiden.html>

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